



You Are Not Alone (Mike x Eleven) by disneyprincess315

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Summary: A bunch of one-shots, with so much Mileven fluff, it's ridiculous!

1. 1: The Reunion

Dustin glanced at the clock for the umpteenth time that afternoon, inwardly groaning when he saw that they still had twenty minutes before it was officially the weekend and they would be free. He leaned back in his chair and continued tracing squiggles on the piece of paper they were supposed to be taking notes on.

Don't get him wrong, he loved math and solving equations, but it was Friday afternoon and their algebra teacher was droning on and on as she worked out the problem on the board at the slowest pace he had ever seen. He almost turned to complain to Mike, who was sitting in the desk to his left, when he saw that his friend was actually paying attention and copying down the entire problem on his paper. Dustin huffed in frustration and started sketching out a dragon, wishing very much that he could fly out of the classroom on the back of a dragon right now.

At the front of the room, Ms. Harrison's voice raised up a few notches, signaling that she was almost to the solution.

"And then we divide two from both sides and we have our answer. X equals...eleven!" she said with excitement.

Dustin sucked in a breath and instinctively looked over at his best friend. He watched as Mike's body stiffened, his face contorting into an expression of pain. His pencil clattered to the floor and he made no move to pick it up. He saw Mike's throat go up and down as he swallowed, hard, and turned to stare out the window, his hands clenching into fists. Dustin bent down to pick up Mike's fallen pencil and kept an eye on his friend for the rest of class, pretending not to notice when he wiped angrily at his eyes.

When the bell rang, Mike sprang from his seat and rushed out of the classroom, with Dustin following closely behind. They walked in silence out to the bike rack as Dustin tried to figure out what to say to him. Finally, he settled on "Of all numbers, it had to be that number", which earned him a quiet nod and a snuffle from Mike. When Lucas and Will arrived, Dustin quickly motioned to them, warning them not to say anything about Mike's demeanor. They

understood right away.

There wasn't much conversation as they pedaled home. As the Wheeler house came into view, Dustin took one last look at his best friend, who looked like he was this close to falling over the edge. "You gonna be okay?" he asked when they reached his street. Mike wouldn't meet his eyes when he replied with a shaky "Yeah..."

Mike dumped his bike outside his basement door and hurriedly unlocked it, rushing inside as the lump in his throat got bigger and bigger. He felt the first tear fall when he passed her fort.

He ran up to his room, shut the door, threw himself onto his bed and let his emotions come as he stared up at the ceiling. The tears slid silently down his temples and he wrapped himself in a hug as he began to shake.

Ten.

Ten months.

Ten long, torturous, shattered, desperate months.

For ten months, he's been falling apart. For ten months, he's been sobbing every night until his voice is hoarse. For ten months, his friends have tried to pick him back up. For ten months, he's fallen right back down.

Somehow, with each passing day it gets worse. He wakes up every morning hoping today will be the day-today will be the day her absence doesn't weigh him down. But as soon as he gets out of bed, something catches his eye-the picture of Will she pointed to, the mirror in the hallway she stared at herself in, his sweatshirt she wore for the first few days-and he's thrown right back into the storm.

To say he misses her is an understatement. To say he can barely stand life without the girl he fell completely and utterly in love and grew a connection that cannot be put into words with is a little bit more accurate.

He's been crying in his room for a little more than two hours when Hopper pounds on their front door.

When his mom calls for him, he only grunts in response, not feeling up for social interaction. His body is shaky and his eyes feel puffy from the amount of tears they produced in the past couple of hours. The second voice that calls his name most definitely does not belong to his mom, however.

"Mike, this is Chief Hopper! I need to speak with you and your friends right now, this is extremely important" Hopper calls.

His sigh is reluctant and resigning as he picks himself off his bed, opens his door and makes his way downstairs. He's surprised to see Dustin and Lucas already sitting in his living room. Taking a seat beside them, he whispers "What's going on?" They both shrug. "I dunno dude" Dustin says, "but the chief wouldn't call us all here if this wasn't serious." Mike studies Hopper, who seems restless and won't stop checking his watch. Dustin was right...Hopper definitely wasn't messing around.

When Will finally arrives, Hopper motions for him to sit down next to his friends. Mike's knee is bouncing up and down as he feels worry starting to creep into him. What could possibly be so urgent that Hopper needed to see the four of them specifically right now, at this hour?

Hopper gets down on his knees, so he's eye level with them. The four kids lean in expectantly, holding their breaths in anticipation.

"I need you kids to believe me" Hopper begins. "I'm not playing games with you. What I'm about to say is the truth. Got it?" The boys nod their heads, urging Hopper to tell them what's so important.

His eyes scan across each boy's face, before finally landing on Mike's. The chief stares straight at him and he shifts uncomfortably, knowing his eyes are probably still red. Finally, he exhales, never breaking eye contact with Mike, and says

"Eleven is alive. We're going to get her tonight."

Mike's stomach drops. His thoughts scatter in every direction and his brain goes completely blank. He can hear his heartbeat in his ears as it speeds up and he suddenly can't take a full breath. He's only vaguely aware of his friends excitedly chattering away, but all he can do as his vision narrows is repeat one thought over and over again.

Eleven. Alive. El. His El. She's alive. She's alive!

Suddenly, he leaps to his feet and fires panicked question after panicked question at Hopper. "Where is she?! How do you know? Did she tell you? Did you talk to her?! How long have you known this? Have you been keeping this from us? Do you know exactly how to get to her? Is she okay? Is she safe?! Please, Hopper, tell me she's safe!"

The room sways the more frantic he becomes. He needs to know, he needs to know she's okay!

Hopper sees the disoriented look in his eyes and guides him back to the couch, so he doesn't pass out right then and there. "Look, I don't have time to explain right now. But you guys have to trust me. Now, let's move, we've got a lot of preparation to do and a girl to find" Hopper says with authority. When no one says anything, he commands one more time "Let's move!" They all scramble up from their chairs and follow Hopper out the front door.

They pile into his police car and once they're on the road, Hopper explains everything.

They boys...well, mostly Mike, were not happy when Hopper tells them about the box in the woods he's been leaving food in for a while. He admits he should've told them sooner, but he didn't want to get their hopes up.

"So, what happened that made you sure it was El taking the food?" Mike asks impatiently.

"I had to drop off the Eggos this afternoon, rather than tonight, because I was supposed to have a meeting right now," Hopper explains. "Once I closed the lid on the box, a big capital 'H' appeared in the dirt next to me." He leaves out the part where he screamed and fell backwards, more for his sake than the kids'. "It ended up spelling

'H E L P'. I asked who they were and the numbers '0 1 1' appeared underneath the 'HELP'". The boys gasp and Hopper can see Mike's grin from where he's sitting. He goes on to explain how an arrow was drawn in the dirt and when he followed its direction, he watched as a small pulsating hole opened at the base of the tree in front of him.

"I told her to stay where she was and I almost went through when I saw her starting to write something else on the ground." They've reached a stoplight and Hopper turns around to look directly at Mike. "She wrote out your name."

A lump forms in Mike's throat and he covers his mouth with his hand. Dustin pats his back and chuckles. "And you said you weren't her Prince Charming" he says. Mike blinks back tears and it seems like he can't stop smiling.

Lucas threw up his hands. "Did she forget about us already?" "No, I asked if she wanted her friends, to clarify, and she spelled out 'YES'. But right after, she underlined Mike's name several times. Guess you're really special to her, kid."

And she's really special to me, Mike thinks, the lump in his throat growing bigger. He fell back in his seat, a warm, fizzy sensation starting to overtake the ache in his chest that's been there for ten months.

"Um...Hopper?" Will speaks up. "Are we going-"

"We're here," Hopper declares, cutting him off. He cuts the engine and they all climb out of the car. Hopper walks around back, opens the trunk and pulls out three bright yellow suits.

Wasting no time, he throws one to Dustin, Lucas and Will. "These are hazmat suits. They're just for protection." He pulls out a fourth one and steps into it, watching the boys as they struggle into theirs.

"Uh, Hopper? Where's mine?" Mike asks hesitantly.

"Kid, you're not going in there" Hopper responds as he slides his arms into the sleeves. Mike's mouth drops open and his brows furrow. "Are you serious?! I'm coming with you! I need to help El! She needs me!"

he shouts back.

"Exactly," Hopper says as he walks over to Mike. Putting his hands on his shoulders, he looks him dead in the eye. "She needs you. That's why you're going to stay out here. If anything happens to you, it'll destroy her." With that, he turns to Dustin to help him with his helmet. Mike opens his mouth to argue, but then closes it when he realizes Hopper is right. He's no good to Eleven dead.

Will catches Hopper's sleeve as he passes him. "Hopper, I can't go back in there," he says forcefully. That place still haunts me everyday, please don't make me go back!" he begs. "Don't you want to help your friend?" Hopper responds. Will's eyes turn downward and Hopper sighs. "Alright, you can stay with Mike. I know how hellish that week was for you."

"Thank you!" Will says and scrambles out of his suit. Mike rushes over. "Hopper, does that mean I can-" "NO."

Hopper briefs Dustin and Lucas on the plan while Mike and Will trail silently behind. It's simple-they stay behind Hopper and watch their backs until they find Eleven. Once they make sure she's okay and she knows Hopper means no harm, they get out of there as fast as they can.

"There it is!" Hopper says as soon as he spots the portal. "Alright you boys ready? "Absolutely" the duo responds. "Mike, Will? If anything were to...happen..." he pauses, trying to find the right words. "Just...don't do anything stupid." They nod and Hopper gets down on his knees. "Be careful!" Will calls as Hopper takes one last look at them and makes his way through the hole. "Thanks Will! And don't worry Mike" Dustin says, turning to his friend with a smile as Lucas follows Hopper. "We'll find her." With that, he drops to his knees and crosses into the Upside Down.

There's a well-worn path in the fallen leaves where Mike has been pacing since they went in there. His thoughts are racing and the anticipation is killing him, unaware of Will silently observing him.

"She'll be okay, Mike" Will says reassuringly. Mike shoots him a weak

smile and continues to pace back and forth. Back and forth.

It's starting to worry him how long they've been in there. His nerves are getting the best of him and he plops down next to Will, making a sound of frustration. He takes to just staring at the portal, willing them to come back out.

"You love her, don't you" Will suddenly says.

He's trained himself to say no when his friends start to tease him about his relationship with El, but every time he denies it, inside he knows he's absolutely lying. And friends don't lie, he realizes with a start. Screw it, he thinks. I don't care if the entire world knows.

So, he turns to look Will straight in the eye as he responds, "Yeah. I do. I really do."

Mike's heart leaps when Lucas, ten minutes later, comes bursting through the portal, followed closely by Dustin. He springs to his feet and repeats "Did you find her? Is she okay?!" over and over. Lucas shoots him a thumbs up as he sprints past him and Will. Mike gives Dustin a confused look, who rips off his helmet. Fighting for breath, he manages to get out "She's alive, we have to get Hopper's car started, so we can get her to a hospital as soon as possible."

"A hospital?! What's wrong with her?" Mike yells, the tears already forming in his eyes. "Don't worry about it, she'll be fine," Dustin replies, jogging past Mike. "Oh, and dude," he says spinning on his heel. "You should probably know she won't stop asking for you."

He grins before turning and running after Lucas, leaving Mike with his mouth hanging open. His breathing is rapid as his brain attempts to process what Dustin said. His thoughts are a mess, each one bringing more emotion than the last. She's alive and he's gonna get to see her it's been ten months and tonight's finally the night and she's coherent enough to ask for him, to ask for HIM specifically, El wants him and gosh, he wants her she's alive and he's gonna get to see her-

Will's voice interrupts his string of thoughts. "Mike, look!" When he turns around

the world dissolves. All that is left is him, her and the person carrying her.

She's right there. She's right there. She's right there.

His emotions build. One right after another, they crash into each other, creating an overwhelming, swirling mess.

His guilt for not being strong enough. His fear for her safety that daily consumed his thoughts. His desperate longing to be by her side. His undying, fiery, fierce love for her.

All of it came out as one strangled, raw, emotional cry as he screamed her name for the last time.

At the sound of his voice, her head turns and when their eyes meet, she screams his name in return, stretching her arms out, reaching for the boy she cared for and loved so deeply.

Suddenly he's running and Hopper meets him in the middle, ready to hand her over. The tears pour down his face as he slips one arm under her legs and the other around her back. Her hands grasp onto his jacket and once she's secure in his arms, he sinks to the ground and cries like he's never cried before.

Their sobs are uncontrollable and covered in tears. Her arms are wrapped tightly around his shoulders as he buries his face in her hair, letting out all the grief that had been mounting since the day the universe ripped them apart. And she's shaking, every part of her is shaking so badly as she clings to him and sobs into his neck.

He becomes aware that he's repeating her name and she's repeating his as if they're still trying to convince themselves that the other is alive.

She's alive, she's breathing and she's holding him like she never wants to let go.

The only reason she pulls back after a while is to see his eyes. She places her hands on his cheeks and cradles his face as she soaks in every detail the best she can with tears swimming in her vision. She hasn't stopped whispering his name, amazed at how one syllable can

feel so good against her tongue.

It's him. It's her Mike. He's alive, he's breathing and he's holding her like he never wants to let go.

Ten months of cold, empty, dark desolation and she's finally back in the warmth and the security of his arms, which are still wrapped tightly around her back and her legs as he gives her a wobbly smile.

"El."

"Mike."

"Home?"

"Home."

They both let out a shaky, almost disbelieving giggle, and she embraces him one more time. "Can you stand?" she hears him ask. Her brows furrow and she looks down at her legs. She can tell he's following her gaze when he suddenly gasps and his body tenses.

It looks worse Right-Side Up, if that's even possible. For a little over a week, a deep gash running the length of her shin has been bleeding on and off and turning colors she's not even sure are natural. Not to mention she's pretty sure the texture it's become means it got infected somehow. It hurt like heck when she slipped in her attempt to climb a tree, where she was intending to stay until her mysterious wooden box was refilled, and a branch clawed through her skin. Moving around on it had only made it worse.

His voice is tinged with worry as he asks, "Does it hurt to walk?" She bites her lip and nods, not meeting his eyes. She didn't like the feeling of being a burden, but in her last few days in the Upside-Down, she had only gotten up and walked when she absolutely had to and even then, she couldn't do it for very long.

"Hey Hopper?" Mike calls and El looks over his shoulder to see that the chief hadn't left, but had turned his back to give them some privacy. Hopper makes his way over and raises his eyebrows expectantly. "I...I can't carry her..." Mike mumbles, his face turning a shade of red. The shame is clear on his face and El's heart aches for

him. "It's okay Mike," she softly reassures him, squeezing his shoulders. He shoots her a small, grateful smile, before she feels Hopper's arms take the place of where Mike's had been. Her hand clamors for his and his thumb traces circles on her knuckles as Hopper carries her all the way back to the car.

She sees that Dustin, Lucas and Will have all squeezed into the front seats of the car when they finally get there. Mike lets go of her hand to open the back door and Hopper sets her down. She gingerly slides into the back seat, suddenly becoming aware of how little she's had to eat that day and how the emotional intensity of the last couple of hours hasn't helped at all. When Mike gets in, she slumps against him and her eyelids flutter closed when his arms wrap protectively around her.

She's about to drop into a deep slumber when she suddenly realizes he's trembling. She raises her head just enough to see that he's been watching her. A single tear falls over his lashes and she gazes into his eyes, finding the same emotion that's swirling around her chest. She doesn't think twice before gently kissing his cheek, causing him to grin. She settles her head back onto his shoulder and it isn't long before she succumbs to her exhaustion. She falls asleep curled up beside him and they don't leave each other's side for a very, very long time.

2. 2: The Nightmare (El)

Run.

Run Will.

Run Dustin.

Run Lucas.

Demogorgon.

Run Mike.

Mike.

Mike!

Run friends!

MIKE!

Use powers.

Can't use powers.

Mike.

He's gone.

"Mike!" El awoke with a start at the sound of her own voice. Mike. Mike is gone the demogorgon took him. Not even thinking twice, she threw the covers off her bed and sprinted to the front door. Shutting it quietly behind her so she didn't wake Hopper, she leapt down the front stairs and took off.

Was it a dream? Yes...but what if it wasn't? The only thing El knew was that right now, she needed to find Mike. She needed him to still be here, to still be alive. It was a long ways from Hopper's trailer to to the Wheeler residence, but she didn't care. Making sure the boy she loved was safe was worth running as fast as her tiny legs would

carry her.

She finally reached Mike's house and headed straight to the door that led to his basement, acting only on instinct. She took a moment to wipe away the tears that were blocking her eyesight before pounding on the door. When nothing happened for a couple seconds, her stomach dropped and her vision started to swim. Nononononono he has to be here, he has to be safe!

She knocked three more times and this time, within seconds, she heard the door unlock.

And there he was. Standing before her was Mike Wheeler, alive and breathing. She whispered his name and had never been so relieved to see anyone in her entire life. Without thinking, she took a step closer to him and raised her hand, timidly placing it on his cheek. She heard a small whimper escape her lips when she felt that he was solid, that her eyes weren't just playing tricks on her. Her fingertips brushed the ends of his hair and she smiled, incredibly grateful that he was alive, that he even existed in the first place.

As El gently ran her fingers through his hair, it's then that he finally spoke. "Who hurt you?" he whispered.

Oh no, she didn't want him to worry about her. AUGH, she was so stupid, she should've just made sure he was okay and then left! I can't burden him with my problems! El thought as she felt her eyes well up.

Before she could turn to leave, Mike grasped onto both her hands and gently pulled her into his basement. When her eyes adjusted, she noticed the three sleeping figures of Dustin, Lucas and Will. Not wanting them to wake up and be hurt with the weight she was carrying as well, she used the first word Mike had ever taught her. "Mike. Privacy?"

"Right, of course" he gently whispered and they both tiptoed up the basement stairs. Terrified that he would suddenly, inexplicably be taken from him, she kept her fingers laced in his as he led them up a second flight of stairs. When they got to his room, he helped her to his bed and turned to lock the door. "El" he said as he knelt in front

of her and slid his hands into hers. "What happened?"

"N...ni...nightmare" she confessed. "Do you want to talk about it?" Mike asked. She met his gaze and was suddenly hit with an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

It was three in the morning. He had been sleeping peacefully. Everything in his world was okay. And yet, he hadn't turned her away when she came running. He hadn't thought she was insane when she had to assure herself that he was alright. And he still hadn't left her...he was willing to listen to her, was willing to help her. He cared. And he loved.

Realizing that she had been staring into his beautiful brown eyes too long, she nodded and took a breath.

"Demogorgon...chasing friends...they got away...except..." El couldn't hold back the tears she had been swallowing as the image of the monster dragging him away from her while she stood helpless played in her mind. Sobs shuddered through her body as she whispered "It...it got you."

She slid off his bed and threw her arms around him, crushing him in an embrace as tears continued to stream from her eyes. She was torn between the unbearable pain of the thought of losing him and the overwhelming relief that he was alive in her arms, his head on her shoulder.

When her sobs finally slowed, Mike moved behind her to prop himself up against the bed and guided her into his lap, putting his arms back around her as quickly as he could. El wanted to stay in this moment forever, smiling as the boy who had given her everything held her. She felt her eyes start to droop and before she drifted off to sleep, she whispered one last thing.

"Thank you, Mike.

Please don't ever, ever leave me."

3. 3: The Nightmare (Mike)

A/N: Hi! This is the exact same story you just read, only told from Mike's perspective. Enjoy!

Mike bolted upright as he was suddenly ripped into consciousness. He scanned his pitch-black basement, his eyes landing on the sleeping figures of his three best friends. He groggily rubbed at his eyes, wondering what on earth could've woken him up so early.

A jolt of adrenaline went through him as he heard three sharp, urgent knocks on his basement door. The one thought in his head was "El?" as he scrambled out of his sleeping bag, being careful not to wake his friends,

He unlocked the door as quickly as he could, desperately wanting to find her safe on the other side. Who else could be knocking on his door at three in the morning? Please be okay, El, please be okay.

Whoa.

In daylight, she was drop-dead gorgeous. In the moonlight, however, she was ethereal. The light bounced off her in silver rays and in this moment, Mike could swear she was an angel. Heck, she already possessed the traits to qualify as one, he thought. Gosh, how he loved her.

But he banished those thoughts from his head when he noticed the shining trail of tears that were streaming down her face. His heart broke as she quietly whispered his name and he wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around her fragile, innocent body. All he wanted was to save and protect her from the horrible things life had and was inflicting upon her. He knew the bad men were long gone. He knew Hopper was taking care of her and she was happy in his home. But still...this innocent, perfect girl held a past no one deserved and yet she amazed him every day with her sweet, gentle demeanor and a curious wonder for everything around her that he absolutely adored. Whatever had happened to her, he swore to himself that he would make it better.

Before Mike could make a move, however, El stretched out her arm, whimpering as her hand touched his cheek. He felt his heart rate speed up and he had to fight to focus on the fact that she was hurting and not on the place where her skin was touching his. She made this exponentially more difficult as she timidly ran her other hand through his hair.

"Who hurt you?" Mike heard himself ask. A single tear escaped her eyes and his chest ached for her. He realized with a start how cold her hands were and he guided her back into his basement.

"Mike" she whispered, glancing down at Dustin, Lucas and Will, who were still sound asleep. "Privacy?" "Right, of course!" Mike gently whispered back. She followed him up two flights of stairs and he secretly noted how tightly she was clinging to his hand.

Once they made it up to his room, he locked the door behind them and led El to his bed. He kneeled down in front of her and took hold of her hands once again. "What happened?" he asked.

"N...ni...nightmare" she managed to get out. "Do you want to talk about it?" El finally looked up at him and Mike felt his heart break when he saw just how much sadness she was holding in her eyes.

She nodded and exhaled. "Demogorgon...chasing friends...they got away...except..." Her voice broke and Mike squeezed her hands tighter. "It...it got you." El threw her arms around Mike and finally let the sobs she had been holding back overtake her. Mike swallowed the lump in his throat and buried his face in her shoulder, pulling her as close to him as possible. "It took you away from me" El whispered.

He knew it was slightly selfish, but his mind couldn't help but try to picture being forced away from her.

He couldn't do it. When his mind got close to imagining the pain, the emptiness, the unbearable longing that that would bring him, he immediately stopped that train of thought, which was then replaced with memories from about a year ago. *She* had been ripped away from *him*. He was nearly destroyed because of it. He quickly lost count of the number of times he had sobbed in her fort, crying, begging for the girl that he had cared for and loved so deeply to

come back, to fill the empty void that had overtaken his mind.

Without her, he was nothing.

Knowing they weren't going to let go of each other for a while, Mike shifted so his back was against his bed and gently pulled El so she was now positioned in his lap. Her cries eventually subsided and right before she fell asleep against Mike's chest, he heard her quietly whisper

"Thank you, Mike.

Please don't ever, ever leave me."

When he was sure she had gone to sleep, he gently put his lips on the top of her head. Kissing her silently, he whispered back

"I will always protect you.

I promise."

4. 4: Fever

Mike barely made it to the bathroom in time. He hurriedly shut the door and threw himself in front of the toilet as his stomach decided he needed to throw everything back up. Clenching the toilet bowl with both hands, he was powerless to stop his shuddering body as he vomited up his dinner.

He knew he should've stopped eating.

The Byers, plus Hopper and El, were over for dinner and he severely regretted not telling his mom that he wasn't feeling great. His stomach had been churning all day and his head wouldn't stop pounding, but he was really looking forward to seeing these people. Everything was going fine, until his mom shoveled an insane amount of lasagna onto his plate. He didn't want to refuse, so he just sat down and attempted to eat a decent amount of what he had been given.

Which was a mistake, because after the first couple of bites, the nausea crashed into him and he knew exactly what was going to happen. He excused himself as casually as he could and ran to the bathroom upstairs.

When he sure his body was finished, he reached up to flush the toilet, his throat burning. Breathing heavily, he rolled so his back was against the wall and squeezed his eyes shut as the room began to spin. He knew he didn't have the strength to go back downstairs, so he focused on slowing his breaths and keeping his head still. The sounds of plates being cleared and lively conversation floated up from the dining room.

After a while, someone knocked on the door. He groaned in response, keeping his eyes closed as the door creaked open. "Mike?"

His lips turned upward into a smile. He never opened his eyes, but he didn't have to in order to know who it was.

"Hey beautiful" he whispered. Just her presence alone was starting to take the slightest edge off his pain.

"Are you okay?" he heard El quietly ask. He opened his eyes as she shut the door behind her, her face painted with worry. He gritted his teeth and shook his head, focusing on a spot on the ceiling. She knelt in front of him and gently pressed her cool fingers to his forehead. "You're burning!" she said with a gasp. She shot up and searched through cabinets for a washcloth. "El, you don't have to-" He was cut off by El shooting him a worried look as she ran it under the water of the sink. She got on her knees once again and wiped the damp cloth across his forehead. "Thanks" he whispered, the cold providing some relief.

"Do you want to stay in here?" she asked in reply. "No..." he admitted. El stuck out her hand, but Mike hesitated to take it. "I really don't want to get you sick." His eyes widened as he realized how long she'd been around him. "You shouldn't be here, El, I don't want you to feel like this." She didn't say anything as she kept her hand outstretched. A half smile appeared on her face and she raised her eyebrows, glancing at her hand and then back at him.

Mike sighed and slid his hand into hers, smiling at the familiar softness of it. El pulled him up, but the movement called back the sickening dizziness. Mike swayed dangerously and dropped the washcloth to grip her upper arm, keeping his other hand firmly locked in hers. Once they were both balanced, she carefully took a step forward and Mike cautiously did the same, keeping his eyes trained on the ground. "Good?" she asked, glancing at him. He nodded and she squeezed his hand. Slowly but surely, they made it to his room and he gingerly slid onto his bed, reluctant to let go of El's arm.

She propped up his pillows for him and made sure he was comfortable, aware that he was staring at her. She met his gaze when she had finished and he smiled. "You're awesome," he whispered, causing her to blush and bite her lip. He leaned back against the pillows and shut his eyes.

The last thing he remembers is El's lips pressing against his cheek before sleep overtook him.

5. 5: Romeo and Juliet

El furrowed her brow in concentration and stared at the words on the page in front of her. A particularly long word stared back at her. She broke it down syllable by syllable, silently sounding it out, like Mike had taught her to, as she tried to make some sense of what it meant.

Eventually, she let out a frustrated sigh and set the book down in front of her. Her friends had told her Shakespeare would be hard to read and they weren't wrong. It was taking her forever to figure out the definitions of all these unrecognizable words, much less comprehend whole sentences. She flopped back onto the beanbag and stared up at the library ceiling.

She loved it here. She had found this place where the bookshelves perfectly hid her from the world and would spend hours after school reading through every book that was at her level. Today was different, however. Her tutor had assigned her a chapter to read out of Romeo and Juliet and she wasn't even sure it was written in English.

She jumped when Mike appeared from behind the bookshelf. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I was just checking to make sure you're okay," he said with a smile.

She glanced down at the open book in front of her. She didn't want to waste Mike's time but there was no way she was going to get through this chapter by herself. "Help?" she asked quietly. "Yeah, sure!" he responded, walking over and sliding onto the beanbag. Handing the book to him, she shifted closer to him so that their shoulders were touching.

"Romeo and Juliet," he said, shooting a side smile that made her feel warm from her head down to her toes. "Have you ever read this?" She shook her head. "It's a classic. I think you'll like it!" he said enthusiastically and turned his attention to the page.

Mike wasn't the biggest fan of Shakespeare. He much preferred figuring out how the world works through science and chemistry as

opposed to trying to analyze the words of a guy who had died five hundred years ago. But he was more than willing to make an exception for El. He knew how much she adored reading and hearing stories, so he cleared his throat and quickly skimmed the section she was on.

Oh. Of course she was reading this part. Out of all the scenes in this play, she had to be on this particular one. He winced inwardly, but he knew he couldn't say no to her, not now, not ever.

"This is Romeo talking" he began. "He says, 'But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?'"

He paused when he felt El lightly touch his hand to stop him. "Mike, what's 'yonder'?" she asked. "It just means something is far away," he explained. She nodded and looked around the library. "So is that table 'yonder'?" she asked, pointing to a table on the other side of the room. "Yeah, you got it!" he replied. She nodded, satisfied and turned her attention back to the book.

"It is the east and Juliet is the sun," he continued. "Is that a met---meta---" he heard El start to ask. "A metaphor? Yes, it is" he replied. "I'm proud of you for knowing that," he added, genuinely surprised. She blushed and smiled, scooting closer to him so her legs were now pressed up against his. His heart rate sped up and he hurriedly continued to read Romeo's monologue.

When he got to the "It is my lady, O it is my love" line, El's eyes lit up. He looked over at her and smiled, realizing that she finally got what Romeo was saying. Watching her discover and understand something new and the joy that that would bring her was one of his most favorite things in the world. Heck, *she* was one of his most favorite things in the world.

"Mike, are we like Romeo and Juliet?" He chuckled. "Well, in some ways...yeah, I guess so." His face fell dark as he remembered what ultimately happens to those star-crossed lovers. "But their story doesn't have a happy ending." "Ours does?" she questioned. He glanced at her and held her gaze. "Only if you want it to," he replied.

Never looking away from his eyes, a beat passed and she breathlessly

nodded.

He wanted it too. He had never been into fairy tales, but without a shadow of a doubt, he knew he wanted a happily ever after. With El. And it filled him with joy that she wanted that too.

He saw her eyes flicker to his lips and back up again. All of his surroundings melted away as he cautiously started to lean in. He could tell El was doing the same and his stomach flipped. He was giddy with anticipation as they got closer and closer to each other. El's eyes closed and

"Hey Mike, we gotta leave soon, okay?" Nancy called, her head poking around the bookshelf. "Hi El!" she added, with a hint of teasing in her voice.

They shot apart from each other at the sound of her voice. "O-okay" Mike stammered. Nancy disappeared back behind the bookshelf and El tried to keep the disappointment off her face. "I should go check these out," Mike mumbled, glancing down at the pile of books beside him, his face unnaturally red. "Maybe we can keep reading that tomorrow," he added, avoiding her eyes.

El's insides dropped as he stood up. She really hadn't wanted their time together to end. She loved hearing his gentle voice make the words on the page come alive and loved it even more when he would explain something to her, making the world seem a tiny bit less confusing. And, gosh, she had been so ready to kiss him. To kiss those lips that had been helping her explore the world all afternoon. It had been this close to happening and she was disappointed it hadn't.

She watched him start to walk away, desperately wanting to grab his hand and stop him, but her body wouldn't listen. She really, really didn't want him to leave, so she stretched out her mind. Stop walking, she silently commanded.

He couldn't move. Why couldn't he move? He tried over and over to gain control again in his arms and legs, but nothing was responding. Panic crashed into him as he stood there immobilized, with no

control over his body. His heartbeat was rapidly increasing, and he would've started to scream had he not heard El rise up off the beanbag.

Oh. Of course, this was her doing. That got rid of the pure panic in his body, but his pulse sped up even more. He listened to her walk across the carpet, still not able to turn around. She stepped in front of him with a tiny smirk on her face and a smile crept onto his face.

She exhaled and stood on her tippy toes to kiss him. She didn't release Mike from her mental clutches until her lips were on his and his hands immediately flew up to the sides of her face. He gently pressed his mouth farther onto hers and he felt El smile against his lips. Her hands slid around his waist and she slightly tilted back her head, her lips locked with his, allowing him to take control for once.

When they pulled back, El giggled and Mike leaned down to rest his forehead on hers. After taking a moment to soak in the innocence and purity of her eyes, he whispered, "I actually have to leave now, alright? But I already can't wait for tomorrow." "Okay, fine" she replied, reluctantly untangling herself from him.

He turned to leave, but right before he rounded the corner, El called out "See you tomorrow, Romeo!"

Grinning, Mike glanced back. "Bye Juliet" he responded and walked away.

6. 6: Bad Day

Mrs. Wheeler couldn't help but notice Mike's quiet, solemn demeanor when he got into the car that afternoon after school. Normally, he would be smiling and eager to tell her all about his day and the things he learned, but today, he hadn't spoken a word so far.

She knew her son's bike, which was now in the trunk of the car, had gotten a flat tire on the way to school, but that couldn't have possibly ruined his whole day...right?

"Hey sweetie," she started cautiously. "How was your day?"

"Fine," he mumbled as he stared out the window.

This definitely wasn't normal.

"Do you have a lot of homework?" she asked, trying to get him to say more. He just shrugged.

Trying to cheer him up, she said "Okay, well...if you finish early, maybe we can go to the arcade after dinner. I heard they just got a new pinball machine!"

She could tell his smile was forced. "Cool," he replied before his face fell again and he turned to watch the passing houses and trees.

Mike's day had sucked. His grade in History had dropped dangerously close to a C because he failed their last test, one of his classmates was mad at him because he wouldn't give them the answers to the science homework, he had been late to his seventh period because he was talking to Dustin and his arm was still sore from where he had accidentally got hit with a basketball in PE. And on top of that, his mom had to leave work early to pick him up from school because his stupid bike blew a tire.

All he wanted to do was go home, sleep and drown himself in self-pity.

When they got home, he headed straight for the stairs. "Oh, by the

way, Eleven's in the basement. Hopper said she wanted to come over" his mom called out to him.

Thank goodness. Mike did a quick one-eighty and dashed to the basement. "Thanks Mom," he threw over his shoulder before he stepped downstairs and closed the door.

There she was, sitting on the couch. Despite the crappy emotions he was feeling, a warm, fuzzy glow crept into him at the sight of her. She had a box of colored pencils next to her and was doodling away in a notebook without a care in the world.

"Hey," he said as he descended down the stairs. She glanced up, smiling when she heard his voice. Her face fell, however, when she saw the pure exhaustion written all over his face. "Hi Mike," she replied and scooted over to make room for him.

Dropping his backpack on the floor, he crawled onto the couch next to her and rested his head on her shoulder. She lifted up her notebook and Mike smiled, accepting her invitation. He draped his legs across her lap and exhaled.

All he needed right now was to be with her and she knew that. She could sense he wasn't in the mood for conversation, so she moved her head to rest it on top of his and turned her attention back to her drawing.

Mike allowed the weight of the day to slam back into him as he watched her draw in the petals of a flower. If he couldn't physically feel El next to him, he would be telling himself he was worthless right now. Had he really done the right thing by not giving out his answers? And why hadn't he studied harder for that test?

He was startled when his lips started to quiver and his vision went blurry as his eyes suddenly welled up. When he blinked, a single tear slid down his cheek. It ran down his face and landed with a plop onto El's arm. He winced when he felt her tense up and prayed she wouldn't make fun of him.

He hated being this vulnerable around her. Usually, he would be the one comforting her as she fell apart, but today was different and he

felt extremely exposed. He didn't want to burden her with his problems, but he needed her. In this moment, he needed nothing more than her presence.

Instead, she wordlessly slipped her hand into his and laced her fingers through his. Her thumb traced circles on his skin and she felt the tension go out of his body.

He smiled, grateful that she understood, grateful that she understood him. He lifted their interlocked hands to his lips and kissed the back of her hand.

"Thank you" he whispered.

"I love you" she whispered back.

Mike shifted so his chin was on the edge of her shoulder and stared into her beautiful brown eyes.

"I know" he replied.

El laughed, understanding his reference and lifted her hand that wasn't entwined with his to wipe the remaining tears off his face. Mike grinned and nuzzled his head further into her neck. They stayed like that, swapping Star Wars references back and forth, for the rest of the afternoon.

7. 7: Party

Please stop talking, please stop talking, please stop talking-

When El reopened her eyes, the girl was, in fact, still talking. She hadn't a clue what she was going on and on about, but what she did know was that it wouldn't be polite to just walk away in the middle of this girl's story...or whatever she was frantically trying to tell her.

Tonight marked El's first party and she really wasn't enjoying it. The boys had been invited to this place by one of their friends whose name she couldn't remember and she had happily agreed to tag along with them...only to immediately regret her decision when she saw how many people were crowded into this one house. Speaking of the boys...where were they? El subtly tried to glance around the room to see where they had run off to, but seconds after she had diverted her eyes from the girl in front of her, whose name she also couldn't remember, the girl waved her hand in front of El's eyes. "El, are you listening?" It wasn't in a mean way, but it was enough for El to feel bad that she had been zoning out.

"Yes, sorry," she replied. "Are you okay?" the girl asked after a moment. No, no she wasn't, but she didn't want to hurt this girl's feelings, so she nodded. Satisfied, the girl launched back into her monologue. El tried hard to keep up this time, but all the unfamiliar words kept bouncing out at her and before she could ask what all of them meant, the girl had already moved onto another topic.

She was starting to feel extremely overwhelmed. Without realizing it, she took a step backwards, almost as if to physically separate herself from the jumble of unrecognizable words that were clogging her brain. When she took another step, the girl stepped forward, never ceasing her endless flow of sentences. El took a third step backwards and gasped when her back hit the wall behind her, which the girl didn't seem to notice.

She was trapped. She knew she should just walk away and find one of the boys, but her body wouldn't listen to her. Instead, she stood, paralyzed against that wall, attempting to block the words that wouldn't stop coming.

She tried focusing her hearing someplace else and the first thing her ears grasped onto was the conversation happening on the other side of the wall. Well, not all the way on the other side, just ninety degrees to the right of her. She was leaning near the edge of the wall, and, going off the little math Hopper had taught her, the corner was ninety degrees. Not that it mattered. She was just trying to distract herself from this one-way conversation.

She strained her ears farther to see if their sentences were a bit less...complicated. When she heard the person on the other wall speak, her heart leapt and she had to fight to keep herself from smiling. They were saying something about their test in science, but she would recognize that voice anywhere. It was the same one that had patiently read her a story that afternoon, less than five hours ago. It was the same one that was always ready to explain anything about the world to her.

Mike was leaning against that wall.

As fast as she could, El glanced behind her to confirm her suspicions and saw that his hands were shoved in his pockets and he was talking to a guy she'd seen around town a couple times. She turned her attention back to the girl, but, as casually and as subtly as she could, she slid her hand along the wall to her right until her fingertips hit Mike's wrist.

She felt him pull his hand out of his pocket and, before he could do anything else, she blindly found her way to the back of his hand. She traced out "0 1 1" along his skin with her finger, hoping he would understand who was touching him and why she was trying to get his attention. She never heard their conversation falter, but she smiled when she felt him flip over her hand and trace an "M" on the back of her hand for his identity.

His fingers then laced themselves through hers and he squeezed her hand. For the first time that night, El felt her mind calm down and the anxiety disappeared from her body. She relaxed against the wall and waited patiently for the girl in front of her to finish.

"Bye, nice talking to you!" she heard Mike say and out of the corner of her eye, she saw the boy he'd been having a conversation with

walk away. A couple minutes later, El heard a female voice call, "Chelsea, come check this out!" "Coming!" the girl yelled back. "Thanks for listening, El!" she said and skipped away to her friends. El sighed in relief, but before she could do anything else, Mike swung her around the corner and, just like that, she was in his arms.

"I'm sorry I left you" she heard him say. "I know you don't really like this type of thing." El nuzzled her head into his chest in response, just grateful to have the weight of the night off her shoulders. "Do you want to get going soon?" he asked. "Yes" she replied and pulled back to look at him.

"Kay, let's go find our friends," he said, pushing himself away from the wall. His arm immediately wrapped protectively around her shoulders and they made their way through the crowd, glancing all around for the guys.

They found Dustin and Lucas downstairs going head-to-head in ping-pong as a crowd cheered them on and Will sitting on a couch nearby talking to some girl.

"Hey Dustin! Lucas! Will!" Mike called. "You guys ready to get going?"

"What? Why?" Lucas called back, standing ready to receive Dustin's serve. "Dustin and I tied!" "Lucas," Mike said to get his friend's attention. He motioned to El and it only took Lucas one look at her exhausted face to drop his paddle and call it a game.

"Not quite the best night?" Dustin said as they trudged back up the stairs. El shot him a weak smile and shook her head. "I'm sorry we have to leave," she said, glancing at her friends. "Oh no, it's totally fine!" they reassured her. "Yeah, I was starting to fall asleep on that couch, so thank goodness you got me out of there," Will said with a laugh. She looked up at Mike, who squeezed her shoulders. "Don't worry about it, okay?" he said. She nodded as they weaved their way to the front door.

They said their goodbyes on the porch and Will headed off towards his own home. Dustin and Lucas went their separate ways shortly after, leaving Mike and El walking in a content silence. His fingers slid through hers as soon as the guys left and the only things El

became aware of were the pale moonlight, the rhythmic chirping of the crickets and the warmth of Mike's hand.

When they reached the Wheeler house, he led her to the hammock swinging silently in the breeze in their backyard. He climbed onto it, smiling and inviting her to do the same. She gladly got in and he lay down on his back so that she could curl up beside him and rest her head on his chest, his arm encircling her shoulders. The chaos of the party has long been forgotten and now it seems as if they are the only two people in the world. As they stared up at the stars together, he absentmindedly skimmed his fingertips up and down the side of her arm in a lazy pattern, something he knows she likes. El sighed contently and closed her eyes as the cool of the night washed over the couple.

8. 8: Water

El gripped Mike's hand harder as she made her way down the steps, the water lapping up her ankles, then her knees, until finally she was waist deep in the pool. "Is this okay?" Mike asked quietly, searching her face for any signs that it wasn't. She nodded, not meeting his eyes. The sensation of being surrounded by water was jogging her memory and she quickly shoved any flashbacks about the bath deep into the corners of her mind. Today was not going to be the day where she let those horrid memories eat her alive. The slight pressure from Mike's hand and the voices of her friends in the background gave her strength, and she raised her head, nodding with more confidence.

"Hey Mike, wanna play chicken?" Dustin called. "El, you could make sure he doesn't cheat!" "Chicken?" Chicken is an animal...and a food...how could it be a game too? She turned to Mike, who had the answer before she even asked the question. "It's just the name of the game. You sit on your friend's shoulders and try to knock the other person off," he explained. "Do you want us to show you how it's done?" "Okay," she replied, with a small smile, excited to see something new. He let go of her hand, to her slight disappointment, and she watched as he swam over to the boys.

"Alright, I call Will-he's lightest," El heard Lucas say as she waded closer to them. "There's no way I can support you!" Mike told Dustin, when his friend turned to him and raised his eyebrows. "Okay, fine. You ready?" Mike nodded and El watched as both Dustin and Lucas disappeared beneath the surface. Will and Mike hovered their partners, before being raised up, seated on their shoulders. "You're going down, Wheeler!" Will called as Lucas moved toward Dustin and Mike. "Wouldn't be so sure!" Mike shot back and grabbed Will's hands, pushing as hard as he can.

El had to keep reminding herself that it was just a game. They didn't actually want to hurt each other, it's just a game, it's JUST a game, she thought as Will gave Mike another shove, causing him and Dustin to sway dangerously. However, when she noticed the looks Dustin and Lucas were giving each other as the two boys struggled with one

another on their shoulders, that's when she started to get worried. What if...what if they weren't really playing? She glanced up at the battle going on between Will and Mike and another pang of worry ran through her body.

Game or no game, she couldn't stand to watch this anymore. The longer it went on, the more intense it got and she was not okay with seeing the boys go head to head like this. Her powers buzzed to life and before she could give her choice a second thought, she extended her mind to below the water's surface and found Lucas's ankles. With a slight jerk of her head, she swiped his feet up and watched as him and Will splashed into the water.

The familiar trickle of warmth seeped down her lip and she pressed her wrist against her nose. She climbed out of the pool, searching for something to help suppress the flow as Mike and Dustin's triumphant cries rang out. When she heard the boys fall silent, she knew they had realized what she had done. As she pressed a paper towel to her nose, she could feel their eyes on her and the guilt gnawed at her heart. What she had done probably wasn't the best move, but she really didn't want to see her friends fighting anymore, even if it was just for fun.

It was Dustin who finally broke the heavy silence. "Well, I think we all know Mike couldn't have won that on his own, anyways." The tension dissolved as Lucas and Will laughed and Mike rolled his eyes. "Whatever, I wasn't doing too bad!" he said, spurring an animated conversation about the highlights of their game. El sat down by the edge of the pool after throwing the paper towel away and absentmindedly swirled her feet in the water, still feeling ashamed of her actions. When she glanced up, she saw that Mike was staring at her with a look of concern. She bit her lip and looked away.

Which turned out to be a mistake, because she didn't see Lucas swimming silently underwater towards her. It all happened so fast; she barely had time to react.

Mike suddenly yelling "LUCAS, NO!" was the only warning she had before a pair of hands latched onto her ankles. She let out a piercing scream as she was yanked into the water and then all sound was muffled. Her heart rate shot up as panic flooded her body and her

legs kicked uselessly under her. Where was the floor, where was the wall? Her arms flailed, trying to get her body back up to the surface, trying to help her get a breath as water rushed up her nose.

Two pairs of hands grabbed her wrists and she was pulled up to the surface, the sunlight hitting her face and all she could hear was the voices of four very worried boys. She immediately started coughing as Mike and Lucas carried her to the shallower end of the pool, all the while shooting concerned question after concerned question at her. When her feet finally hit the cement of the pool floor, she turned towards Mike and held onto his forearms to stabilize herself as a coughing fit racked her body.

She was still shaky from the adrenaline and couldn't seem to quite get a full breath. It was only when she focused intently on breathing in and out, in and out did she finally calm down. She could hear Lucas apologizing profusely over and over again behind her, but it was Mike's dead serious, urgent voice that got through the shock of what just happened that was clouding her mind. "El. Are you okay?" she heard and it was then that she realized how hard he was gripping her elbows and how hard she was gripping his arms.

"Yes," she whispered and gave him a wobbly smile, inwardly flinching at the panic in his eyes. She turned around to look at Lucas, who immediately said, "El, I'm so so so sorry, I'll never do that again! I just thought...I mean...you looked so bummed out sitting on the edge and I thought...I'm really sorry, please can you forgive me?"

Forgiveness. That was a concept she had a full understanding of, because Mike had taught her forgiveness. But that's another story for another day.

"I forgive you," she told him. She was okay now, and that's what matters. His face relaxed in relief and he looked down at the water with a smile on his face. But she wasn't done with him just yet.

Her mouth turned upward into a mischievous smirk and she let go of Mike's arms. In the most innocent tone she could come up with, she said Lucas's name to get his attention. When he lifted his head to look at her, he was met with a face full of water. El giggled at the shocked look on his face as he wiped the water out of his eyes. "Oh, it's on!"

he exclaimed playfully as he splashed El back. "Heck yeah!" Dustin cried and slammed his hand into the water, drenching all four of his friends.

And thus started an afternoon of splashing and laughing and playing in the pool that made the fear of almost drowning a distant memory in El's mind. All she cared about was the joy of seeing her friends smile, the happiness Mike's laugh brought her and the sense of freedom being in the water without having to use it for sensory deprivation gave her.

When they finally climbed out of the pool a few hours later, all five of them were cheerful, yet very worn out. She shivered as her wet skin met the cool air and Mike rushed to grab a towel for her. He threw it over her shoulders and she shot him a grateful smile. As the group gathered up their things, he quietly said, "Hey El? You've still got about another hour before Hopper wants you home."

She didn't hesitate before asking "Can I come home with you?" which she happened to say at the exact same time Mike asked, "Do you want to come home with me?" They both recoiled in surprise and she giggled before replying "Yes, please," with a smile.

"You guys ready to go?" Will called and they moved toward the exit and out onto the street. Their conversation on the way back was lively and full of excitement as they recounted their summer afternoon.

When Mike and El arrived at the Wheeler house, his mom greeted him at the front door. "Hey! How was the pool?" "Awesome," Mike replied. "Is it okay if El hangs out here for a little bit? Hopper isn't picking her up for a while." "Of course! El, honey, do you want to shower off? You can use Ted and I's bathroom if you want." El nodded and followed Mike up the stairs.

He quickly showed her to his parents' bathroom and made sure she had everything she needed. When he turned to leave, El caught his hand and gave him a soft peck on the cheek. What gave her the impulse to do that, she didn't really know...the only thing she did know was it just felt right. He grinned and her heart fluttered in her chest.

Closing the door as he left, she turned on the water and peeled her bathing suit off. She stepped into the shower, sighing as the warm stream of water hit her body. The stickiness that the chlorine left on her skin washed away almost immediately. As she worked on scrubbing a thick glob of shampoo through her hair, she suddenly heard Mike's voice coming from his bathroom, only a few doors down.

She strained her ears, noticing that his voice sounded...different. It kept changing pitch and he was drawing out different syllables. He wasn't exactly talking, but she could still make out actual words. Whatever he was doing, it was pretty and she decided she liked it, making a mental note to ask him about it later.

She stepped out of the shower feeling clean and refreshed, the residue from the pool having been swept away. As she pulled on her shirt and sweatpants, she noticed that she was simultaneously exhausted and happily content, a combination she'd never felt before, but welcomed all the same. Strangely, it made her want nothing more than to cuddle with someone. Pulling open the door, El headed down the hallway.

She found Mike sitting on his bed, resting against the pillows as he thumbed through a comic book. His hair was already almost dry from his shower and just the sight of him made her heart swell. When he glanced up and his eyes met hers, he gave her a sleepy smile, one she gladly returned. He watched as she walked over to his bed and he scooted to one side. "Hold me," she mumbled, flopping onto the mattress next to him. He chuckled before throwing aside the comic book to pull her into his arms. Her arms went around his waist and she rested her head in the crook of his neck, her eyelids drooping. She felt him softly lay his cheek against her head as his arms encircled her shoulders. A content sigh escaped her lips and she snuggled in closer to him, smelling the chlorine that was still lingering on his skin. She was about to drift off to sleep when she remembered what she had heard in the shower.

"Mike?" she whispered. "Yeah?" "Um..." She scrambled to find the words for it and somehow, Mike saw the struggle on her face. "El, what's wrong?" he asked, his voice filled with concern. She hesitated before saying, "Talking...but prettier..." She tilted her head up,

hoping Mike would understand. He always did. However, she could see the confusion in his eyes, and she bit her lip. "Oh!" His face lit up.

"Singing!" She nodded. Sing-ing. She'll definitely remember that one. Staring at him intently, she silently begged him to realize what she was asking. "M-me?" he timidly asked. She nodded again and gave him an encouraging smile. "O-okay." He hummed his first note, finding the pitch and she settled her head back against his chest.

"Wise men say only fools rush in, but I can't help falling in love with you."

His gentle, tenor voice filled the air around them and El's scalp tingled with goosebumps at the beauty of it. "Shall I stay..."

"Yes," El whispered. "Please stay." Never leave me, she thought. Mike smiled before continuing.

"...would it be a sin? If I can't help falling in love with you.

Like a river flows, surely to the sea, daring, so it goes, some things are meant to be." The way he sang "darling" made El's stomach flip and she buried her face in his chest, wanting him, wanting only him forever.

"Take my head..." One arm slid off her shoulders to cover her hand with his. She gladly laced her fingers through his, noticing for the hundredth time how well their hands fit together.

Enunciating every word, he sang, "Take my whole life, too."

A lump formed in El's throat and tears swam in her vision at the sincerity in his voice. Mike Wheeler was everything she would ever need ever. She lifted her head to stare deep into his eyes, allowing one tear to fall silently down her face. He rested his forehead against hers and she closed her eyes as he lovingly massaged her fingers. Her bottom lip trembled as he sang the last line.

"For I can't help falling in love with you."

Her lips connected with his. Soaking him in, she poured more passion into this moment than anything before. He pulled her closer to his

body and sank deeper into their kiss, his hand releasing her fingers to travel up her arm, up her shoulder and finally tangling itself in her hair. Her hand curled around the collar of his shirt as her mouth pressed hungrily against his.

For neither could she help falling in love with him.

9. 9: Unwanted

Even before he saw her lips start to quiver, Mike knew exactly what was happening. He knew this was severely hurting El and he needed to stop it, but he just stood, frozen and powerless as he watched her face crumple up. The bottoms of her chocolate eyes were brimming with tears and he had witnessed this enough to know she was trying to be strong and fight it. His chest ached as he watched her attempt to swallow her emotions, his mind screaming at him to intervene.

It was Saturday morning and all had been peaceful at the Wheeler house before their doorbell rang and Hopper marched El through the front door. When Mike saw the look on the face of his favorite person in the whole world, he almost cried out, but he quickly bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself.

Apparently, Hopper had something extremely important he needed to discuss, not just with Mike's family, but with the Byers, Henderson's and Sinclair's as well. One by one, the families of his best friends trickled into his house, just as completely confused as he was. None of them had any idea what was going on and Hopper wouldn't talk until everyone was present.

"Adults, I need to speak to you" Hopper said in a gruff voice. "*Only* the adults" he added, glaring at the kids. The parents hesitantly followed Hopper to the other side of the room, who motioned to El to join them as well.

They attempted to keep their voices down, but the four best friends could clearly understand what they were saying while they huddled in a corner. The boys shot each other worried glances as Hopper described what had happened the night before.

El had a nightmare. A really bad one, apparently. In fact, it scared her so much that, in her sleep, she had completely destroyed her room using her powers. According to Hopper, it looked like a hurricane had come crashing into her room. All of her furniture, with the exception of her bed, had snapped right in two, a good chunk of the wallpaper had been ripped away from the walls, and all her belongings had been thrown aimlessly across the floor. But the worst

part was that, when Hopper ran in to check on her, she had accidentally shoved him violently back into the wall, knocking him out cold.

The adults' eyes grew wider and wider the more Hopper's story progressed and when he begged for one of them to take her in, he was met with a stunned silence. All eyes were on Hopper...well, all except Mike's. He couldn't pry his eyes away from El, who was sniffing and rapidly blinking back tears as she stared at the ground with her arms wrapped around her.

He hated seeing her in this state...even though it had happened several times before, each time got worse-for him and for her. His friends were starting to glance at him, instinctively knowing he was the only one who could help her while he stood, paralyzed.

There was no doubt in his mind that Hopper would come around and eventually get some sense knocked into him. He was just frustrated right now, so Mike kept his attention on El. The adults were currently reasoning with Hopper and from where they were standing, they could tell the parents knew he would calm down eventually, but they still made it very clear that El had to stay with Hopper.

"I DON'T WANT HER, KAREN!" he shouted suddenly, his frustration reaching a boiling point.

Mike gasped and watched as El clapped a hand over her mouth to keep a heartbreaking whimper in. She turned and sprinted out of the room and Mike didn't even have to think twice about running after her, ignoring all the shocked faces in the room.

As soon as she slammed the door, the sobs came. She took a couple shaky steps to the window on the side of the room, hating the vulnerable sounds that she couldn't stop making. The tears blurred her vision as she looked out at Hawkins, the only home she had ever known.

She loved it here. This was the place where she felt like she belonged...but with Hopper's words ringing in her ears, she wasn't so sure of that anymore and it was breaking her. It was a complete accident, what she had done to Hopper but it just proved that she

was still dangerous.

Dangerous. The more she thought about that word, the more she wished she could just disappear so she wouldn't accidentally hurt anyone ever again. The last thing she wanted was to be a threat to the people she cared about.

She kept both hands firmly pressed against her mouth to muffle her cries, the salty tears running over her fingers and down her chin.

When the door opened, she didn't turn around. She was a mess. There was only one person who could see her like this and she prayed with everything she had that they were behind her.

A strong, steady pair of arms encircled her waist and she sighed in relief, only to have it immediately turn back into a sob. He knew. Simple as that. Mike knew that when she was on the edge of a breakdown, all she needed was something to physically hold on to. She never verbally told him that. But that's just how well they understood one another.

Moving her hands away from her mouth, she grasped onto his arms as if she was dangling from a cliff and he was the only rope keeping her from falling into a downward spiral. She felt him rest his cheek against her head and while it would seem his presence would calm her down, it only broke her more. Sobs threatened to continue to shake her body and somehow, he felt her resistance to them.

"Let it out. Trust me, I'm right here."

So she did. Right there in his arms, she broke down. Digging her fingers into Mike's wrists, her raw cries filled the room and the tears dripped in a constant stream down her face. His grip tightened and he held fast to her.

Everything hurt. She felt as if the emotional pain was choking her and she couldn't breathe as her sobs were released and her chest heaved up and down with every broken cry.

He kept her pressed against him as she let out a final, shattered scream and then, just like that, the pain was gone. She sagged back

into him, feeling numb and completely worn out, her head falling against his chest.

He slowly sank to the ground, bringing both of them to a sitting position, El still leaning all of her weight against him. In the sudden, deafening silence she not only became aware of her shallow breathing, but his shaky breaths as well. When she glanced down at his arms, she noticed they were trembling. She spun around to face him and for the first time since this whole ordeal started, she got a look at his face.

The sudden movement made him fall backwards and when his arms caught his fall, he stayed in that position. His eyes met hers and she finally noticed something she had missed during her meltdown.

Mike was crying too.

The pain was clear on his face as a single tear fell from his eyes. She saw his anguish in the way his eyebrows were creased, his chin quivered and his body shook.

'He's hurt...because of me...' El thought. 'What have I done?' She felt awful, but she didn't know what to do, so she inched closer to him, wincing at the way he bit his lip to keep it from trembling.

After a couple beats, he timidly raised his hand and placed on El's cheek. Without hesitation, she did the same to him, brushing away one of his tears with her fingers. Their heavy, agonizing breaths became synchronized as they stared into each other's eyes and watched the pain disappear.

Finding her voice, El whispered, "Mike, I'm s-"

He cut her off almost immediately. "Don't be sorry. You hear me?"

Her eyes flickered around his face, looking for some sign that he was lying, but all she found was compassion. The teensiest smile eased onto his face and she let out a shaky exhale. Bringing her hand away from his face, she slid it over the one cradling hers, never breaking eye contact. She eventually nodded, a sign that he recognized immediately.

It meant she understood.

10. 10: Teach Me

Once El understood there was a whole new world out there to learn about, she would constantly seek new information, as well as someone to teach it to her. The definitions she found regularly were a bit overwhelming once they started to pile up, but she didn't care. Besides, the definitions themselves were so simple and easy to understand, she didn't have any problem keeping them all straight. Conveniently, every single one of them also came from the same person. I'll give you three guesses who that person was and the first two don't count.

The first time it happened was a couple months after El had come back into their lives...

"Okay...thanks Hopper...alright, we'll be over soon...tell her we're coming." Sighing, Mike hung up the phone and turned to his friends. "El woke up this morning and her voice was gone. To make matters worse, Hopper got called in for an emergency at the station. He asked us to go keep her company for a little while, just in case she needs anything," he explained, already throwing on his jacket.

"Did he ask US to come over, or did she ask for YOU to come over?" Lucas said with a smirk. He could feel himself start to blush as he indignantly replied, "HE asked for all of us, Lucas. You guys good to go?" Dustin and Will nodded their heads in agreement and with a reluctant "Fine" from Lucas, they were off.

El answered the door when they finally got there, looking slightly tired, but her face lit up when she saw them. "Hey El! Are you feeling okay?" Mike asked immediately, with a hint of concern in his voice. Ushering them in, she nodded, then pointed to her throat. "Yeah, Hopper told us," Mike said, giving her a sympathetic smile. "Do you think you're getting sick?" Will inquired. She shook her head, opening her mouth to say something, only to immediately shut it when she realized talking wasn't an option today. Thinking fast, Mike scanned the trailer and spotted a notepad lying on the counter. He grabbed it as well as the pen beside it and handed them to El. "Here, do you think you could write out what you want to say?"

She nodded, looking grateful and sat down on the couch as she timidly started printing out the words she couldn't say out loud. The boys followed and Mike kneeled beside her, watching the letters appear on the page.

"Bad dream" she wrote out. "Screaming". When she pointed to her throat once more, the pieces fell into place. They glanced at each other worriedly, except for Mike, who lowered his gaze, frustrated that he couldn't have been there to comfort her. Instead, she had literally screamed her voice away last night and he hadn't been able to do a thing.

Her hand moved again, and pretty soon, "I'm sorry" was written out on the page. The boys practically fell over one another to reassure her she had done nothing wrong and that it wasn't her fault. Mike relaxed when a smile played at her lips and she seemed to accept what they were saying.

After a pause, Lucas finally spoke up, checking his watch. "Well, what should we do for three hours?" When Dustin suggested they watch TV, they agreed immediately and a few minutes later, they were sprawled in front of Hopper's television, flipping through channels until they found a cartoon they all loved.

That, and random arguments about the unrealistic aspects of the show, kept them occupied until Hopper poked his head into the trailer. "Thanks boys, you're free to leave now. I just need to run to the store, then I'll be back, okay El?" She nodded and the four boys reluctantly rose from where they had been sitting as they heard Hopper's car start. "Are you sure you'll be okay by yourself?" Mike asked, turning to El. She turned her attention to her piece of paper and scrawled "Yes. See you later?" "Of course!" he replied with a smile, and went to collect his things with his friends. However, he wasn't about to leave without doing something first.

Hoping his friends wouldn't relentlessly tease him for this, he opened his arms to El and her smile made his heart swell. She walked over immediately and wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder. He smiled contently, burying his face in her hair. Seeing no reason to let go anytime soon, they held each other in an embrace as they listened to the door slam and their friends run rather loudly

down the steps. She sank farther into his arms the second they were alone and he tenderly squeezed her shoulders.

"Hey Mike, you coming?" they heard Lucas call from outside. El's head popped up and she broke away from him, hurriedly grabbing her notepad and scribbling something down. When she flipped it to show him, he saw the word "Stay?" scrawled at the bottom of the page. "Absolutely," he answered, walking towards her and she grinned.

Lucas's voice came again. "MIKE!" He playfully rolled his eyes, not so much out of annoyance, but to make her smile. Not wanting to deafen her, he placed his hands over her ears before yelling back, "GO WITHOUT ME!"

"HAVE FUN WITH YOUR GIRLFRIEND!" they hear Lucas respond and Mike feels his face instantly begin to burn. He begins to retort, "LUCAS, SHE'S NOT MY-", but he knows they've already taken off, most likely swapping "Mike-and-Eleven" jokes all the way home. However, he forgets all about them when he feels El's hand on his shoulder.

They eventually find themselves snuggled up to one another on the couch, Mike telling story after story about the stupid things him and his friends had done over the years, and El leaning against him, with her pencil and paper in hand, occasionally jotting down a question, or laughing so hard at the antics he's describing to her that he has to pause the story when he sees her wince from the pain in her throat.

After one particularly funny tale that left her in a coughing fit he hated having to watch, they fell into a content silence as she nestled her head against his shoulder and he gently ran his fingers through her hair.

His eyes snapped down to the page when he saw her hand begin to write something out, squeezing her sentence in between the dozens of other words filling the paper. He waited patiently as she carefully printed out the letters and secretly snuck a glance at that adorable face she would make whenever she was concentrating. When she was done, she turned the notepad to show him. Written out in her handwriting was the request,

"Teach me something"

"Teach you...anything?" he questioned. She nodded and smiled with an eagerness that made him chuckle. The request sounded simple enough, but once she had laid her head back onto his shoulder, he began to realize how daunting of a task this was. There were thousands upon thousands of words out there and his brain was reeling at the fact that he had to pick one. Making sure it was one that El would want to learn filtered them a little, but there were still so many to choose from. He glanced around the room, looking for inspiration and he ended up reading everything she had wrote on the notepad since he and his friends had arrived. When his eyes landed on the phrase "I'm sorry", a light bulb went off in his head.

"El, do you know what forgiveness is?" She shook her head and he knew she was awaiting a definition. "Forgiveness...um...forgiveness is...well...it's when you aren't mad at the other person anymore for what they did. For example, when Dustin rode over my foot with his bike the other day, it hurt a LOT and, admittedly, I was pretty angry at him. But when he apologized and said he was sorry for what he did, I believed him. I could tell he felt bad for what he did, so I forgave him to make things better and stopped being mad at him. Does that make sense?"

Lifting her pencil, she scrawled out "It does. Thank you, Mike." He grinned and planted a kiss on the top of her head. "Anytime, El."

The second time it happened, they were soaking wet and in very low spirits. El had spent the afternoon at the Wheelers, hanging out and watching movies, and the boys had agreed to walk her home, ignoring the clouds in the sky. Everything was fine, except for the fact that they had forgotten how far Hopper's house was from Mike's if you were walking on foot. That wouldn't have been a problem, had it not started to downpour when they were halfway there.

"I can't believe we agreed to do this!" Dustin yelled, having to make himself heard over the noise of the rain. "For the thousandth time, I'm sorry!" Mike yelled back, wishing his friends would just suck it up. "Guys, we need to keep going!" Will exclaimed, jumping over a puddle and attempting to urge his friends on.

Shivering, Mike pulled his hood up and glanced over at El, who was walking with her head down and clearly was not having a good time. He couldn't help but suddenly be hit with an onslaught of memories relating to the night they found her, a night much like this. When he remembered how vulnerable and helpless she had looked, standing there with raindrops rolling down her face, a familiar twang of a longing to protect twisted in his chest.

His train of thought was interrupted by a gentle hand brushing against his. He smiled as El interlaced their fingers and moved to walk closer beside him. Realizing how cold her skin was, he buried their clasped hands in the pocket of his jacket and she squeezed his hand.

Their friends were arguing about who knows what ahead of them, but Mike tuned them out when he heard El's gentle voice.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Teach me something?"

Once again he was caught off guard, wishing he had given this more thought since the last time she had asked. What word could he teach her today...

Oh, wait. Words.

"El, have you ever thought about what language actually is? I'm producing a bunch of random noises with my mouth, and somehow, something inside your head is interpreting what you're hearing into actual thoughts. And what even are these words anyway? Who came up with them and who decided what they meant? How did they then tell everyone in the world what those words meant? Did everyone agree on those definitions?"

Realizing how confusing he sounded (and that he was starting to confuse himself), he paused and looked over at her. Her eyebrows were raised and he could tell she was trying to take all this in. When she realized he had stopped talking, she smiled and said, "Keep

going."

For the rest of the rain-soaked walk to Hopper's, he explained the ins and outs of semantics and rhetoric to her, even realizing for himself how crazy language is. He wasn't quite sure she was understanding everything, but he was sure she had gotten the basics. He became so wrapped up in telling her all these things and she was so entranced by this concept she had never thought about that neither of them realized they had finally made it to their destination.

The third time it happened was a Sunday morning and he was in the middle of finishing his homework when he heard a knock on his bedroom door and El came bursting in at such a speed that he was immediately worried she was in trouble. But when she ran and jumped onto his bed, landing on her back, he relaxed and soaked in the sight of her looking his happy.

"Teach me something?" she asked excitedly. This time, he knew exactly what she was going to learn. He dropped his assignment, knowing he'd have time to do it later and dragged her to his basement. Pulling up a chair for her, he seated himself in his infamous Dungeon Master seat and opened his D&D manual.

For the next two hours, Mike spilled all of the knowledge he possibly could to her about this fantasy game him and his friends absolutely adored. He sounded like a complete nerd and he knew it, but the fascinated look on El's face was all he needed to know that she didn't care how dorky he sounded. She let him ramble on and on and when she quietly asked if she could join them on their next campaign, he could've kissed her right then and there.

Yes, he was a nerd. But he was her nerd and that's all that mattered.

But then one night, Mike showed up unexpectedly at El's doorstep. It was well past midnight, when a knock on the door had jolted her out of the restless slumber she had been in. Hopper opened the door and as soon as she heard Mrs. Wheeler's voice, her stomach dropped. She scurried out of bed as a list of all the reasons she could possibly be here at this hour ran through her head, each one of them making her

more worried than the last. Hopper was blocking the doorway when she ran into the living room and she could only listen to Mrs. Wheeler's words as she tried to peek around him.

"...he just started screaming and screaming," she was saying. "When I ran into his room, he was sitting upright in his bed and he couldn't stop shaking. He looked like he had seen a ghost or something, he was so panicked. I tried to ask him what had happened, but the only thing he would say was 'Eleven' over and over again. I'm so sorry to disturb her, but she isn't still awake by any chance?"

El finally managed to get past Hopper, poking her head out from under his arm. And there he was. His face was turned downwards, but El could see the steady stream of tears running down his cheeks as he bit his lip in shame. He looked so fragile, so...broken in the moonlight, that El had to choke back her own tears that immediately sprung up.

"Mike," she whispered, and Hopper stepped back. Mike's head shot up and when their eyes locked, he let out a sob, covering his mouth when he realized what he had done. Her chest ached for him. It took a lot to get him to cry, and she knew him well enough to know he really didn't like crying in front of people besides her, so whatever happened had to have been terrible.

Ignoring the adults watching them, she threw her arms around him and pulled him in close. His arms wrapped tightly around her back, and she could feel his body trembling. He whispered her name in a strangled voice meant only for her to hear.

"You're okay. You're okay. You're safe. I'm safe. It's okay," she repeated in his ear. She hated seeing him in pain and wished for the hundredth time that she could bear all the nightmares and flashbacks, instead of him having a portion of them.

"My mom doesn't understand and Hopper barely does either. Please...please don't leave me," he said in a shaky, low voice and she understood right away. Releasing him, she slid her hand into his and led him back into her house, refusing to listen to the protests from the adults. Because both Mike and El knew they'll never get it.

He followed her to her room and he hesitantly sat on the edge of her bed, staring down at his hands. She shut the door and climbed onto the bed next to him. Pressuring him into talking was out of the question, so she just sat in silence and watched him trying to compose himself as she rubbed her hand gently up and down his back.

"Nightmare," he finally whispered, wiping at his eyes. El hesitated before saying, "About...about me?" although she suspected she already knew the answer. "Yeah..." he admitted. She winced. Causing Mike pain was the last thing she would ever want to do on this earth.

He sighed and flopped down on her bed, his head landing in her lap. Scrubbing the tears from his eyes, he curled his body in towards her. Her fingers automatically moved through his hair, playing with the ends as his eyelids dropped shut. The serene look that came over his face made her smile and she was almost certain he was asleep, when she heard him mumble something.

"Hey El?"

"Yes?"

"Teach me something?"

She paused. "Mike...you know so much." What could she possibly teach him, the boy who always had an answer? And besides, he was so much better at explaining things than she could ever hope to be.

"I...I just want to hear your voice..." he murmured, lifting his eyes to meet hers.

Her heart shattered at the pleading edge to his words and she lovingly stroked his cheek as she racked her brain for something, anything she could say to him.

He must've seen the struggle on her face, because he began saying "El, I'm sorry, you don't have-"

"Papa taught me something."

Silence.

She forced herself to keep going. "He taught me bad things. He taught me there are bad people. He taught me hurt. And pain. And all the bad feelings."

She felt him place his hand over hers, the one resting on the bed. His touch grounded her as she continued talking.

"He taught me I was nothing. He taught me I was bad."

"El..."

"He taught me I had to do bad things. He taught me I had to go to bad places. He taught me I was good if I did bad things." Her voice began to waver, but she pressed on.

"He taught me I was a monster."

His fingers were now gripping hers and he started to sit up, ready to comfort her, but she gently put a hand on his shoulder. He rested his head on her legs once more, with a concerned look on his face. "El..." he tried again.

"Mike. You taught me something too.

You taught me good things. You taught me happiness and friendship. You taught me Eggos and Dungeons and Dragons. You taught me words and forgiveness. You taught me butterflies," she said, pointing to her stomach, "and fuzzy feelings. You taught me hugs and kisses."

By now, Mike was blushing and a wobbly smile was creeping onto his face.

"You taught me I'm not the monster.

You taught me promises.

You taught me love."

At that, he lifted his head off her lap and wrapped his arms around her, his face burrowing into the crook of her neck. She smiled as she held on tight to him, working up the courage to say what she was about to say.

"Mike," she whispered in his ear.

"I love you."

She's said it before, but each time seems to hold more truth than the last. Her heart pounded, like it did every time she spoke those three words out loud, and patiently awaited the response she knew was coming.

The elated smile spreading across his face when he lifted his head made the fizzy sensation spread all throughout her body. Staring into his perfect eyes tempted her to say it again.

"Michael Wheeler. I. Love. You."

He hooked a finger under her chin and her heart skipped a beat as he gently pulled her in. She could feel his breath on her lips as he tenderly whispered, "Eleven? I love you too."

She doesn't think she'll ever get tired of hearing that.

His kiss holds an intensity that sends sparks all through her body. It's short, but she wouldn't trade this moment for anything in the world.

When they pulled back, El was giddy with adrenaline and she found herself giggling, the happiness bubbling out of her as he smiled and pecked her lips one more time.

"I really like saying that to you," Mike murmured, causing her to grin even more. She let out a content sigh and laid down among her pillows, watching as Mike followed suit, positioning himself to face her. They took to just staring at one another, El letting her eyes roam around his face, admiring every feature.

He eventually asked a question that made her pause.

"You don't believe what Papa taught you anymore, right? You know everything he ever said or did to you was wrong?"

Pondering this, she eventually nodded solemnly. A thought suddenly popped into her head, surprising her. However, she was even more surprised when she realized it was true.

"He was wrong.

He hurt me in terrible ways.

But you know what?

I forgive him."

11. 011: Mountains

A/N: Ever since I started writing fanfiction, I've had a separate document just for random concepts and snapshots of Mike and El being cute together. So, I finally decided to throw as many of them as I could into a one-shot and came up with this! It isn't the most well-written piece I've ever written, but it's not terrible, so I'm posting it!

Also, there's five days. Most of us have been waiting for this for over a year and there's FIVE DAYS left! *screams in a corner* I'M SO FLIPPIN' EXCITED EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE! :D

Okay, I'll be quiet. Enjoy!

The Wheelers had never been the most outdoorsy people. Karen and Ted much preferred lounging on the couch and watching TV to running around and enjoying nature. As for Mike and Nancy, it's not like they didn't like being outside, but their day-to-day lives had never expanded much beyond the suburbs.

So when Joyce suggested a camping trip to properly end their summer vacation, Mike was shocked when, not only did Dustin's and Lucas's parents agree to it, but his own couch potato parents were on board with the idea. Even more surprising was when Hopper reluctantly agreed to let El tag along with them. Not that he minded, of course.

So that's how he found himself smushed in the back of their family car, in between a couple sleeping bags and a tub of food, driving up a mountain road with a pop-up trailer attached to the back that he didn't even know his dad owned. El is seated up front watching the trees fly by with great curiosity, and he smiles at the sight of wonder on her face. He glances out the window behind him and makes sure the Hendersons and Sinclairs are still following them and the Byers closely up the winding mountain path. Settling back in his seat, he lets his mind wander to all the fun things he wanted to do with his friends this weekend and everything he was hoping El could experience.

He was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he didn't realize they had reached their destination until he hears El gently say, "Mike, we're here." Glancing up, he grins when he looks out the window to see his friends already climbing out of their cars. El must've seen the excitement on his face, because she smiles and opens the car door, glancing back at Mike before sliding out and soaking in the mountain air. He climbs out after her and runs over to his friends.

"This is so cool!" Dustin exclaims, spinning in circles as he took in their surroundings. "How did Jonathan know about this place?" "Who knows!" Will replies, "but this is perfect!"

They were almost completely secluded. On every side of this campsite were trees as far as they could see. There wasn't a cloud in the sky above their heads and somewhere, they could hear the sound of water flowing in the distance. The far end of the clearing sloped upwards to create a hill that the boys immediately want to climb, but their parents are calling for them, asking for their help unloading everything.

"We should totally build a fort!" Lucas suddenly says as they were pulling containers out of the trunks of their cars. "Yeah!" Dustin agrees. "We haven't built a decent one since that epic fort back in fifth grade! I still can't believe my mom made me take it down," he says, kicking at a rock.

"Is this our tent?" Will calls excitedly, pulling out a box that's almost half his size. "Yeah, that's yours!" Jonathan says. "I can set it up for you guys if you want to go explore." "Thanks Jonathan!" they all say and drop whatever they had been carrying. Mike grabs El's hand and the group dashes for the tree-covered hill, laughing and shouting "race you!" all the way up.

When they reach what they assume to be the top, they're surprised to find that there was another smaller clearing up here, one that was conveniently perfect for a fort. Their eyes are wide as they soak in the sight of this private place they had all to their own. All it took was one glance at each other for them to all take off in different directions, leaving El only mildly confused as each one begins working on their silently agreed-upon tasks. Mike heads straight for the middle of the clearing, scoping out the terrain they were dealing

with and analyzing which area would be best to build this fort in. After finding the perfect tree to be the center of it, he starts the job of clearing away anything that would get in their way, blueprints for this thing already running through his mind. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Lucas and Dustin hunting for fallen trees they could haul over and Will's on the hunt for the biggest sticks he can find. As for El, she is curiously observing all of them, but there comes a moment when Mike catches her watching him, causing his stomach to flip. He's about to beckon her over, when he hears Dustin call out to her.

"Hey El! Could you give us a little help?" he calls, gesturing to the long, lanky tree he and Lucas are clearly struggling to carry. Mike's eyes widen and he makes his way over to his friends. "Dustin..." he starts wearily, ready to scold him for trying to use El's powers for his own advantage, but he's cut off when he sees El nod and walk over to them. He bites his lip and subtly moves so he's positioned behind her, ready to catch her in his arms, were she to overexert herself. Because that has happened far too many times for his liking.

Lucas and Dustin step back as the tree begins to levitate, grinning as they watch it smoothly float over to the middle of the clearing. No matter how many times they've seen this, it never fails to amaze them. Sure, Mike is always shocked to see things moving through the air on their own, but there's always a side of him that's extremely concerned for her. He keeps a careful eye on El, only relaxing when the tree finally crashes down and she wipes the tiny droplet of blood from her nose.

To his relief, that's the only thing his friends ask her to move for the rest of the fort-building process, and his mind quickly turns back to the task at hand. Slowly but surely, their grand fort comes together as they rush around, finding the best materials they can, swapping ideas with each other and occasionally giving orders. Every once in awhile, each individual will pause and chuckle at how serious they're being about this, but, screw it, they're still kids and they don't have anything else to worry about right now.

Finally, they step back to admire their work. It's a beautifully crafted fort, complete with two rooms, three entrances and a leaf-covered "carpet", courtesy of Will. Mike's mind flashes for a second to the

makeshift blanket fort standing in his basement and his eyes flicker to El, wondering if she's thinking the same thing.

Lucas speaks up eventually and they all snap out of staring at their work of art.

"Now what?"

"That...is a great question..." Dustin replies, shrugging his shoulders. "How about hide-and-seek?" Will offers and the others immediately agree enthusiastically. These woods surrounding them are huge and they're surprised they hadn't thought of the idea before. "Hide-and-seek?" El quietly pipes up and the boys wait patiently as Mike explains the rules to her. "Do you want to play?" he concludes when she understands the concept. She nods eagerly and Dustin is quickly elected as the seeker.

The second Dustin starts counting, Lucas and Will take off, but Mike pauses when he feels a hand brush against his. El's fingers slip between his and when he turns around to meet her eyes, he's afraid he would find something is wrong, but all he can see on her face is bashful admiration. He smiles and gently rubs his thumb against her hand, the warmth in her eyes making his heart melt. Something passes between them, and although he can't put a finger on exactly what, he knows she feels it too, as she squeezes his hand gently. He realizes with a start that Dustin is still counting and they smile one last time before releasing each other and heading in opposite directions, ignoring the panic that rises of not knowing where the other person is.

Mike is deep in the woods when he finally finds a bush to hide behind, crouching down beside it, but making sure he can still see the path he came from. It's a while before he sees Dustin come near him, with Lucas following behind, but it takes even longer for Dustin to check his hiding spot. "Took you long enough!" Mike remarks as he climbs out from under his bush, brushing himself off as Dustin smirks. "At least your hiding place was better than Lucas's." "Hey!" the boy exclaims, lightly smacking Dustin on the arm. Mike rolls his eyes and glances around, not surprised that they hadn't found Will yet. He always was the best at this game and is famously known for the most creative hiding spots. As for El...well, he supposes he shouldn't

worry...she is fully capable of taking care of herself, after all.

Dustin sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Why do we even let Will play this game?" he says, exasperated. "And a more important question...where are we?" "Umm...I have no idea..." Mike replies, realizing he completely forgot how he got here. Lucas swears under his breath and is about to say something else when they hear a voice come from above them.

"Guys! Look up!" Their eyes widen and they slowly raise their heads to find a figure sitting on a branch in the tree above their heads.

"Will! How long have you been sitting up there?!" Mike calls, surprised that he never noticed him. "Since before you wandered over here. I watched you hide behind that bush," Will said with a smirk. "I was planning on not saying anything, but I heard you guys are lost and I can see the way back from up here." They watch, dumbfounded as he nimbly swings down from the tree, landing with a soft thud among the pine needles.

Mike jumps when he feels something wet hit his cheek. He wipes at it in confusion, pulling his finger away to find it was just water. When he sees Lucas flinch as well, he looks upward, along with his friends, to see that that giant rain cloud that had previously looked miles away was now right above them.

Pitter patter pitter patter PITTER PATTER

SPLOOSH

The sky opens up and the rain falls thick and fast, drenching the four friends within seconds. Mike's stomach drops all the way to the ground when he realizes who's still out there.

"El."

"What?"

He begins to panic, cursing himself for not thinking of this sooner. He glances around wildly, his heart rate shooting up.

"EL!" he screams, and is about to start running, when Dustin grabs his

wrist. "Hey! You're going to get lost if you go out there by yourself! Here's the plan: Will, get us back to where we came from as soon as you can, and we'll split up to see if we can find Eleven from there. She can't have gone far."

Mike swallows and nods, shoving his hands into his pockets and glancing around one more time. Will takes the lead and they trudge behind him, calling El's name every once in a while and trying to keep themselves as warm as possible. By the time they begin to recognize their surroundings, the rain hasn't let up and is instead growing heavier by the second.

"Alright!" Dustin yells. "Don't go too far, but we should split up from here!" Mike doesn't need to be told twice. He turns and sprints from the group, blindly dodging branches and fallen trees. "El!" he screams, his eyes darting all around him, the rain limiting his visibility. He calls her name over and over again, becoming more frantic each time he's only met with the pounding of the rain. He presses on, making sure he knows where he came from and he never ceases calling out for her. Eventually, his foot snags on a root sticking up from the ground and he falls to the earth, narrowly avoiding a puddle on the way down.

He lies there panting, internally screaming at himself to get back up and keep looking. He's soaked, he's freezing and he just wants to find his girl. "El!" he cries again out of desperation.

Then finally, FINALLY, her voice came, distant and soft, but he hears it all the same. "MIKE!" He sighs in relief and scrambles to his feet, starting to run in the direction he thought her voice was coming from. "MIKE, HELP!" she calls again, and he whips his head to the right, sure her voice was now coming from that way. "El, I'm coming!" he calls as he climbs over a fallen tree in his path.

But she wasn't in that direction either. He squints through the rain, trying to make some sense of where her voice was coming from as she continued to yell for him. He spins in circles, hearing her in what seems like a different place each time. "El, I don't know where you are!"

This was it. This was absolute torture. He would argue this was worse

than when disappeared last year, because then, he couldn't even contact her. Now, he could hear her loud and clear. He could hear the pain in her voice as she cried out for him. And he couldn't do a thing about it.

He's disoriented and the sheets of rain that separated them would not stop coming. Still, he's determined not to give up. Pausing to take a breath, he closes his eyes and lets the noise of the rain fade away. He waits for her voice again, and when she screams his name, his eyes fly open and he turns, running confidently through the trees.

"Eleven!"

"Mike!"

There! He found her, thank goodness he finally found her. She's sprawled under a tree, reaching for him, and he drops beside her to wrap her in his arms. They're both soaked to the bone and she shivers as she clings to him. He suddenly realizes that she's been out here way too long as he holds her tighter, but he's just so happy he found her.

"We need to get you dried off," he says and she nods. He grasps onto her hands and rises to his feet, pulling her along with him. However, the second she stands up, she lets out a yelp of pain and was about to crumple back to the ground, when Mike slipped his arms around her and hoisted her back up. She leans heavily against him as he asks, "El, what's wrong?" "I h-hurt my foot, I-I think it's twisted," she replies, her voice strangled. His heart clenches and he adjusts them, so he can better support her weight. Her arm immediately goes around his shoulders, and he grabs her wrist, putting his other arm around her waist. "Ready?" he asks softly. She nods and they both take a step, Mike wincing at her sharp inhale. "Try putting as little weight on it as you can, okay?" "Mm-hm," she murmurs, biting her lip and taking another step, shifting off her right foot as soon as she can. They continue like that for a while, the rain still coming down and the terrain not helping at all, but they're making process.

That is, until El's whimpers grow louder and more frequent. He tightens his grip and they make it a few more steps before he finally feels everything leave her. Her knees buckle and she falls to the

ground, on the verge of breaking down in tears. He immediately drops to his knees beside her as she chokes out "Mike, I can't...I can't do it." She's a mess and frantically tells him over and over again, "I can't do this!"

What he wouldn't give to be able to stop this rainstorm and be able to carry her all the way back to the campsite.

He puts his hands on either side of her face and gently raises it, so she looks him in the eye. Her breaths are rapid and pain is written all over her face as she stares back at him.

"El, I know it hurts. I'm really sorry, but we have to keep going. We can't be that far now and you can rest your foot when we get back, okay? You are the strongest person I know, you're gonna make it, I know you are. And I will be with you every step of the way. Please El, you can do this."

Slowly, her breathing returns back to normal and he moves his hands down to cover hers. She nods her head hesitantly and Mike smiles, pulling her up once more. Clinging more tightly to his shoulders, they begin to walk once more and soon they get into a rhythm as she hobbles beside him.

They eventually run into their friends, who were starting to make their way back to the campsite. "Hey guys!" he shouts and they all turn around, relief flooding their faces when they see El is with him. "She hurt her foot, she needs help," he tells them and Dustin rushes to support her other side.

The second they get back to the campsite, Mike hears his mom call, "Michael, there you are! Come here, please!" He's reluctant to leave El, but his friends reassure him that they'll get her to the tent and help her with whatever she needs. He sighs and squeezes her shoulders before Lucas trades places with him. Returning El's small smile she flashes to him, he turns and makes his way to his parents' trailer.

Her ankle hurts, and it hurts a lot. As Dustin, Lucas and Will help her into the tent and over to their sleeping bags, she puts as little weight

on it as possible, because when she does, a lightning bolt of pain shoots through her lower leg. They're as gentle as they can be with her and she is grateful for that as they set her down on top of her sleeping bag. Her leg is stretched out in front of her and she's doing her best to keep to keep her foot immobile. She's still shivering and the boys notice. One of them throws a blanket around her and she wraps it tightly around herself as they watch her in sympathy.

She had been lying out there in the rain for longer than she'd like to admit, unable to put pressure on her ankle. She'd been running, hoping to get a perfect hiding spot before the boys did, when her foot sunk into a hole on the forest floor that she hadn't seen. It's all a blur after that-she just remembers falling and an eruption of pain in her ankle. She remembers crying out and gingerly pulling her foot out of the hole, terrified to move it at all. She had sat there in that position until the rain came, and even then, she knew she wouldn't be able to walk on her own for a while, so she had just laid there until Mike found her like that.

Staying in one position for so long wasn't the smartest idea, and she was regretting that now. The muscles in her back are sore and tight, twinging every time she moves. Her neck is starting to stiffen up and she winces as she rolls her head around, trying to relieve some of the tightness. Will, ever the observant one, notices this and comes to kneel beside her. "El, does your neck hurt? Do you want a massage?"

Bless you, Will Byers.

She nods and Will moves behind her, but before he even lays a finger on her, he asks, "Is Mike going to kill me for this?" causing her to grin and shake her head. He then begins rubbing her neck and down her back, per her request. He finds her knots soon enough, but he can't quite get them out, though he tries his best. "Wow. Yeah, you're holding a lot of tension here, aren't you," he comments as he works on one of them.

They all jump a little when they hear the zipper on their tent start to move. Mike pokes his head into the tent, and they all sigh in relief. "My mom gave me a bunch of stuff to hold us over until the rain stops." "Did she give you food?" Dustin asks immediately and Mike chucks the supply of snacks his mom gave him at his friends. "Yes!"

Dustin cheers and Mike throws the blankets she'd given him to them as well, his eyes darting to El and Will.

"Will, I can take it from here," she hears him say when he's handed everything to his friends. Her heart leaps as Will gratefully moves out of the way, shooting Dustin and Lucas an "I-don't-know-what-I'm-doing" look and Mike sits down behind her. She sheds the blanket she's wearing and he whispers "Hi," in her ear as he slides his hands over her shoulders. She hopes he can see the smile that creeps onto her face from where he's sitting.

He then begins to knead her neck, gently but firmly and she sighs contently. It wasn't that Will was rough, but his hands are smooth and gentle and...well, they're Mike's. They're the hands she knows. The boys have struck up some conversation about who knows what, but she's paying more attention to this than she is to them. He goes slow as he works his way down her back, his fingers pressing into her skin, knowing exactly which spots to hit and she can already feel her muscles relaxing. When he finds a knot on her lower back, he digs his knuckles into it in a circular motion. The tension starts to disappear, and it's then that she realizes how much she's been needing this. When he's sure he's worked it out, his thumbs work their way up her spine, leaving a trail of warmth, and he moves onto another knot. This time, he places one hand on her shoulder to steady her and presses into the knot with the heel of his palm, rolling it back and forth, and checking with her every once in a while to make sure he's not hurting her. She says no every time, because Mike Wheeler hurting El on purpose? That's the most unlikely thing in the world. Once that knot's out, he does one more once-over, making sure all her tension is out by thoroughly rubbing her shoulders, neck and back and she makes a mental note to ask him to do this more often. She almost turns to ask him to do one of her favorite things, but he's one step ahead of her. His fingertips grace the back of her neck and she turns her head downwards. Mike's fingers brush smoothly over her skin, tracing lazy patterns that make her shiver. He smiles when he sees the goose bumps appear on her neck.

When he's finally finished, she leans back into him, amazed at how she can feel his love in just his touch. He tenderly kisses her cheek, his arms go around her and she's convinced this is where she wants to

stay. Raindrops are still pattering on the roof of the tent and she's perfectly content to rest her head against Mike's chest and let herself drift off to sleep.

"Dude, I think she fell asleep."

"Hmm?" Mike hums, lifting his cheek from her head. He realizes then how relaxed the girl nestled up to him has become and he chuckles. Nudging her, he whispers, "El, you awake?" There's no response and he smiles. Gripping her shoulders, he supports her weight as he moves out from behind her and gently lays her down on the sleeping bag, being extremely careful not to move her injured ankle. She shifts slightly in her sleep, exhaling softly. Not really caring that his friends are watching, he takes her hand that's lying at her side in both of his and gently runs his thumb up and down her skin.

Lucas clears his throat and Mike winces, waiting for the teasing he knows is coming. "So. Are you two dating now?" he asks and Will and Dustin lean in expectantly. He sighs and glances back down at her, the corner of his lips turning upward at the peaceful look on her face. "Well, we're...we're something," he replies, looking back up at them. Lucas nods and launches back into their conversation about a group project they don't want to do. Mike sighs in relief, happy that he dodged that question. But, to be perfectly honest, what he answered with wasn't a lie. They hadn't labeled anything yet, but right now, he loves her and knows he will for a very, very long time, he's positive she loves him back, and that's all he needs.

Soon enough, they all find themselves gathered around a crackling fire, the sun long gone behind the horizon. El woke up about an hour ago, just in time to join everyone for dinner, where the boys were shocked to learn she had never had a hot dog, and proceeded to feed her as many as they could, which she thankfully didn't mind. Now, hushed conversations between his family and friends were blending with the cool mountain breeze as they roasted marshmallows and life was good.

Mike glanced across the fire where El was sliding the chocolate into her third s'more of the night, another American treat she had never

been exposed to. It was one of the first times she had left his side that night, but he was just so happy she was happy and doing something he grew up doing. Her ankle wasn't bothering her as much as it was previously, and though she still walked with a limp, she was able to move around, to his relief. He sighed contently as he watched the flames lick at the sky.

He slowly became aware of the glowing, pale light that was hovering in the corner of his eye. When he looked up, he gasped at the sight of the moon silhouetting the trees. He had seen plenty of full moons back in Hawkins, but without the lights from the suburb, the sky was a deep inky black, with tiny glowing dots scattered perfectly throughout. It all highlighted nature's main attraction for the night-a sliver, perfectly round circle that cast a gentle, ethereal glow across the treetops.

It was absolutely gorgeous.

His feet started moving automatically to get a better view, but he stopped when he realized he wanted to share this moment with a certain someone.

He watched as she bit into the gooey, graham-crackery, sweet concoction she had made and smiled as her eyelids dropped and an expression of pure delight appeared on her face. He broke out of his trance when he remembered why he had turned his attention to her in the first place with a chuckle. Avoiding the smoke the best he could, he weaved his way through his family and friends, stopping just behind El. Making sure his parents weren't watching, he slipped his hand into hers.

Her fingers latched on instantly, but before she could turn around, he whispered, "Can I show you something?" She nodded eagerly and he led her by the hand away from the campfire and into the trees.

Mike spotted a clearing right away and helped her climb over the fallen trees and bushes, going slow so she wouldn't stumble and fall in the dark. He supported her as best he could, making sure it was as painless as possible for her to follow him, growing more and more excited for the look on her face when she sees what's hanging in the sky tonight. When they finally reached the opening, he took both her

hands in his. "Okay. Look up."

When she turned her gaze upwards, he could hear her breath catch in her throat and his heart melted at the amazement lighting up her face. "Moon?" "Yeah." "And stars?" she asked with a fascinated giggle. "Mm-hm," he responded, remembering the night they had laid on the grass outside his house and he had explained everything she wanted to know about what was above them.

"Pretty," she whispered, the awe evident in her voice. She hadn't taken her eyes away from the sky since she looked up, but she gently squeezed his hands as a content silence fell around them. Mike, on the other hand, couldn't peel his eyes away from her face, which was bathed in the soft moonlight, making her skin glow and her eyes sparkle.

His heart swelled and he pressed his lips against her temple. She murmured her response and, taking one last glance at the beautiful sight above them, wrapped her arms around his chest, after leaving a kiss of her own on his cheek. His arms went around her and he realized how perfect of an ending to today this was. They weren't running from an interdimensional monster or worried about government agents hunting them down. Instead, they were holding each other by the light of the moon, without a care in the world.

An unspoken promise passes between them. They don't say a word, but somehow, the kind-hearted, loving nerd and the gentle, telekinetic superhuman both come to an agreement that they'll never, ever leave each other.

Surely you've heard stranger things.

12. 12: Long Nights

(An unnecessarily long) A/N:

Wow, it has been way too long since I've updated...sorry about that! But, I have a good reason! You guys, Season Two. Flippin' Season Two. I'm literally restraining myself from going on a rant about it right now, because I know once I've started I won't stop. BUT HOOOOOOLY CRAP IT CHANGED MY LIFE THAT'S NOT AN EXAGGERATION! If you need someone to scream about it with, I will gladly do so with you because AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH IT WAS ABSOLUTELY FREAKING INCREDIBLE! And also, I don't think I could possibly love Mike and Eleven more than I already do, they are my LIFE!

So that's that! Also, I'm running low on ideas for one-shots, so if you guys have any requests or ideas you'd like to see turned into a Mileven one-shot, please feel free to let me know!

"8:00, you hear me? I want you home when the clock reads eight-zero-zero exactly, okay?" "Okay Dad," El tells Hopper, starting to get impatient. "And call me or tell Mrs. Byers if you need anything, got it?" "Yes Dad, can I go?" Sighing, he ruffles his hand through her hair and she shoots him a toothy grin before climbing out of his police car. "See you at eight-zero-zero!" she calls as she walks up the sidewalk to the Byers' porch. As soon as she rings the doorbell, a whirlwind of shouting and thudding feet is suddenly heard from inside and it isn't long before the door is whipped open to reveal her very energetic friends rushing to the door to greet her. "Hey El! Ready to learn how to play one of the best games of all time?" Dustin exclaims excitedly as she steps into the house and he pulls her into a good-natured hug. "Wait, El, you've never played Monopoly?" she hears Max say, followed by Lucas quickly clearing his throat. "Right...sorry..."

"It's okay," she says, giving Max a tight-lipped smile. She's getting better-at the beginning, she refused to even talk to the girl. Now, she had come to realize that she was going to have to be friends with Max, whether she liked it or not. El wasn't the best at giving second

chances, but her and a certain other person were working on it, little by little. Speaking of that special person...

Her eyes scan the room, and when they land on him, her insides flip and the room stands still, just like it does every time she meets his gaze. He's been waiting patiently on the side for that moment when he can have her all to his own. Her lips curl upward into a smile and the force that pulls them together is magnetic. They meet in the middle and she manages to give him a quick kiss on his cheek before she's in his arms and all is right with the world. She can hear her friends tip-toeing back to the living room and she's grateful they're respectful when it comes to moments like this.

"I missed you," Mike mumbles. "It's been two days," she replies with a smile and rests her head on his shoulder. "That's way too long," he quietly says as he presses his lips against her forehead. "What are we doing today?" she asks when they finally separate. "We've been wanting to do a Monopoly marathon for a while. Don't worry, we'll teach you how to play!" he explains, lacing their fingers together and leading her to Will's living room.

The youngest of their group had yet to fully recover from the events of early November 1984, so Mrs. Byers had requested they hang out someplace where she can keep tabs on her son without being overbearing, at least for the time being. She's running errands at the moment and is planning to stay out a little later, so the party can be as loud as they want, without worrying about disturbing her. A game board is laid on the coffee table in the middle of the room, where Dustin is frantically dividing paper money into six little piles as Max organizes the bank and Lucas and Will set out all the figurines. "El, who do you want to be: the thimble or the hat?" Will asks. She just stares back at him. What the heck is a thim-ble. And how could you BE a hat? "Oh, we've got a loooong ways to go..." Lucas mutters, earning him a death glare from Mike.

Two hours later, she's gotten the hang of it. She's always been a fast learner and the party had no trouble getting her to understand the ins and outs of this game. And turns out, she was really good at it. "El, I'll trade you \$200 and Virginia Avenue for Pennsylvania Avenue," Dustin offers. They're well into the game at this point, but still, no one has managed to get a monopoly and the stakes are high. El

glances at her properties, thinking it over. "\$300 and Virginia," she finally says, trying her best to hide a smirk. Dustin's eyes light up. "Deal!" he cries and hands over her end of the bargain. She grins and places her newly won property next to the other two pinks she already owns. Dustin's face sinks and she giggles as he realizes what he had just done. "Wha...how...when did you get St. Charles?" he sputters. She shrugs. "While you and Lucas were arguing about robbing the bank," earning her a round of high-fives from her friends. "Well, crap! Will, how much would you give me your green for?" "No way are you getting that property!" Will responds, laughing.

A smile plays at her lips as she realizes how happy she was to be sitting here, with all her friends, doing normal teenager things and just generally enjoying life. The atmosphere was alive and enthusiastic and it felt like nothing could ruin this night.

But of course, something did.

Just like that, something changed. Something was off. A terrible feeling twisted in her gut and goosebumps rose on the back of her neck.

Something was here. There was a presence she couldn't quite place. Something was lurking somewhere in the back of her mind, but it slid out of her grasp every time she tried to look directly at it. A quick glance at her friends' faces told her no one else sensed it-none of them, except...

Her heart froze and she shot up from her chair. The split second after she says, "Will!", the boy cries out, startling the rest of the party. His head drops into his hands and she's in front of him, forcing him to look at her. Tears are already forming in his eyes as he begins trembling and whimpering, clutching his head. "It's coming, it's here, it's here, it's coming!" he repeats over and over again.

"You have to fight it, Will," she says firmly, making sure to maintain eye contact with him and trying her best to remain calm, although, in reality, she's far from that. His gaze is wild and his hands are shaking, his breaths rapid. He's fighting a battle and she can feel it-she can feel the darkness, the shadow, the outstretching fingers. Their friends behind them are on their feet, offering encouragement of their own,

but wisely keeping their distance.

"No, get out! Get OUT!" Will is almost screaming now and he shakes his head in a futile attempt to rid his mind of the demons that are closing in. El's arms prickles with goose bumps-not the kind she gets when she hears something beautiful or when Mike gently plays with her hair, but the kind that display her fear and despair at having to watch her friends suffer. "Don't let it get you!" she repeats, her hands now gripping his wrists.

"They're...they're watching!" he cries suddenly. "Who? Who's watching you?" El fires back, eyes darting around the room. "Them!" He's staring over her shoulder, and she turns around to find their friends still gathered around them, with the same confused look on their faces as she is sure is on hers. "Our...our friends?" she asks, turning back to him and he nods, tears sliding down his cheeks. "Why can't they watch?" He only shakes his head and squeezes his eyes shut, clearly having difficulty breathing.

She thinks fast and pulls him to his feet. If she were being plagued by an unseen evil, she wouldn't want those she cared about having to see it either. "Stay here," she commands to her friends and proceeds to half guide, half force Will to his room.

He falls onto his bed when they get there, his fingers curling in his hair as his tears continue to fall. She kneels beside him and, shutting her eyes, she reaches out her mind and she can suddenly clearly see the shadows that are waltzing around him, teasing his mind. His attempt to ward them off is diligent, but it's not enough. Praying this doesn't hurt him, she ever so slightly nudges at the darkness with her powers and it reacts, recoiling with a start. Will gasps sharply and his body jerks, which breaks her concentration. "Did that hurt?" she asks, the look on his face alarming her.

"A...a little..." he starts to say, but his words are cut off when his breathing increases and his gaze lands on something across the room, on what she can only guess is this unseen evil. "El, it's...it's coming back!" he manages to get out before his eyes glaze over and he begins to shake once more. "Okay...okay, hang on," she says shakily, trying not to panic. She grabs onto his wrists to steady him and shuts her eyes once more.

A rapid knock suddenly comes from the door, startling them both. "Hey El, Will? We're just making sure you guys are okay," they hear Dustin say from the hallway. It's become clear that this is a fight she's going to have to be the one to win and she's starting to realize she's too much of a mess right now to do it without support.

"Mike," she calls, making sure Will can hold his own for the time being. When nothing happens, she tries again, this time a little more frantic. "Mike!" Finally, she hears the door swing open and Mike immediately says, "El, what's going on?" She feels his hand on her shoulder and she leans against his legs. He understands her plea, and kneels down beside her, wrapping an arm fully around her shoulders. "Will, is it the Shadow Monster?" he asks quietly and the boy nods, still trembling under El's grip.

She exhales and closes her eyes, ready as she'll ever be. The evil is still looming in the corners of his mind and it seems to shrink back when it realizes she's watching them. She takes a moment to examine it, contemplating the best way to make it go away. It doesn't seem to be latched onto his brain anywhere, so theoretically, she should just be able to push it away from him...right?

Her powers encircle this entity as a whole, feeling every edge and boundary of it. It's getting nervous and she's surprised it hasn't put up a fight yet. But she goes for it anyway, giving the darkness a mental shove. As soon as she does, Will is violently jerked backward and lets out a yelp of pain, her hold on his wrists being the only thing stopping him from falling back onto the bed. She opens her eyes in confusion and Mike pulls her closer. "Will...what...?" she trails off, giving her friend time to find his voice. "It's attached," he finally whispers and her stomach drops. She shuts her eyes and sees that the shadows have resumed their original position, threatening to engulf Will's mind entirely. This time, her examination is thorough and she finally finds the thread snaking from the back of his brain up into the darkness, taunting her.

"Will, I'm sorry," she whispers and he stiffens. With one jerk of her head, she snaps the thread right in two. The creature screeches and Will cries out, but she holds fast to his wrists. Wasting no time, she grabs onto the shadows and throws them toward the window. The sudden gasp from Mike is an indicator that it's visible to him,

meaning...

Meaning it's out of Will's head. She did it. The monster's gone, at least for now. She opens her eyes and lets herself fall against Mike, who runs his fingers up and down her arm gently, while repeating, "Good job, you did it, it's gone," over and over. "Thank you, El," she hears Will whisper and she glances up at him. He doesn't look too great, but he's free of the darkness for the time being and that's all that matters. "You're welcome," she replies. "How long had that been there?" "Um...will..." Will starts, biting his lip. His eyes dart from Mike to her, then back to Mike. "Is it okay if...um...I talk to Mike...um..." "Alone?" she finishes for him and he nods. She sighs and Mike squeezes her shoulders. "I'll wait for you," she whispers to him and he replies with a grateful "Thank you".

Her other friends had left a while ago and El is beginning to doze off as she leans against the wall opposite Will's room, when Mike finally reemerges. The first thing she notices about him is his eyes-they're faded and weary and missing the light they usually held. He silently shuts the door, whispering "He's asleep," and she didn't fail to recognize the worn-out edge to his voice. His posture is limp, his face a mask of fatigue.

She wastes no time closing the distance between them, pushing off the wall and wrapping her arms around him. He sighs and hugs her back, resting his cheek against her hair as she closes her eyes. They stay like that for a while, soaking in the feeling of each other's presence. He eventually speaks, his voice a whisper meant only for her to hear.

"I...I pretend I'm strong when I'm with him. I pretend that I have all the answers and everything's going to be alright, but..." His sentence trails off as his words begin to waver and she tightens her grip, nodding her head against his shoulder. Because she feels the exact same way. They both know deep down they're really powerless when it comes to the evil that will not leave their friend alone, and the feeling of helplessness that surrounds the two of them in this moment is real. All they can do is be there for him and stay strong for a couple hours because that's what he needs. But it's taking a toll on them, and one of the only things that helps in the endless love they

have for one another. They fall back on each other every single time completely drained, emotionally, and physically, in El's case.

They hold each other for a good while, standing in the Byers hallway and she lets him silently cry and he lets her bury her face in the crook of his neck. They're dreading the moment they have to separate, because this is where they feel the most secure.

He's calmed down a little by the time the phone rings, startling the two. She really, really doesn't want to let him go and she's thankful that he keeps an arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders as they go to answer it.

"Hello?" she says into the receiver. "Kid?" Her eyes widen and she glances at the clock. 10:58. She was supposed to be home three hours ago. Her stomach drops and she nervously bites her lip as she timidly responds, 'Hi Dad...' She hears his sigh of relief, before he very forcefully asks, "Where the hell have you been? I've been worried sick about you!" "I know, 'be home at eight-zero-zero'. But Dad, Will had an...episode. We needed to stay with him." Hopper pauses. "Is he okay?" he asks finally. "Yes. He's asleep now," she replies.

"Wait a minute, 'we' needed to stay with him? Who is 'we'?" "Um...Mike and I. We stayed with Will," she answers and beside her, Mike stiffens. "Is Mike still there?" "Yes." "Can I speak to him? Please?" She finds the request a little odd, but hands Mike the phone anyways. However, before she does, she covers the receiver with her hand and whispers, "I don't want to leave you tonight." "Me neither," he mouths, taking the phone from her. "Hey Hopper," he says, his voice shaking slightly. She leans against him as he listens to what just sounds like a jumble of muffled words to her. "Mm-hm...yeah...no...yeah, I know..." His eyebrows raise. "Are you sure?...okay...yes sir, I understand...I'll see you then...bye." He hangs up the phone and smiles at her. "He thinks it's too late for you to go home at this point. He asked me to take you home with me. Don't worry, he's not mad that you were late-he knows it's not your fault," he explains.

She sighs and melts against him, and he folds her in his arms once again. "You need sleep," she mumbles against his chest, feeling the exhaustion radiating from him. "So do you," he replies, rubbing her

back. She honestly would've fallen asleep right there if he hadn't taken her by the hand and led her to the front door. After making sure they lock up the house, Mike climbs onto his bike and once she's stable on the back, he sets out into the night, with El firmly gripping his jacket.

It's been a couple months since her return, and she's ridden on his bike a handful of times since then, but she gets the same thrill this time as she does every time. Because she missed the feeling of trusting him to get her somewhere and being this close to him so dang much.

She remembers the first time Mike offered her the backseat on his bike-she had been timid and cautious, opting to place her hands on his shoulders to steady herself as they rode to who knows where. But now, she was more than happy to let her head rest in between his shoulder blades and wrap her arms around his stomach as the night air swirled around them. Sleep was threatening to overtake her, but she shook herself awake when one of Mike's hands covered her own that was clutching his jacket. "We're almost there, okay?" she hears him say, and she nods against his back.

Still, she's dozed off by the time they reach the Wheeler house and Mike has to wake her, before helping her off his bike. They're both exhausted and weary by the time they trudge through the front door and they kick off their shoes in a heavy silence, noting that the clock says it's almost midnight. She feels like she'll collapse any minute, but she still refuses to leave his side tonight. There's no way in heck she's going to willingly be left alone in the dark, with nothing but her thoughts and the images and anxiety dealing with Will had come with. And besides, the basement is freezing without him.

He starts to head for the stairs, but her hand snakes around his forearm and gently tugs him towards the basement steps. He gives her a confused look, but follows agreeably, knowing full well that a tired El is a stubborn El. Not that he minds what she's doing in the least. She never releases her hold on him as she leads him down the basement stairs, making sure to shut the door behind them. When they reach the bottom, he slips his hand into hers, understanding physical contact is important to her right now, and goes to switch off the lights. The sudden darkness is welcoming to their tired eyes and

they make their way over to El's infamous blanket fort, which is still standing, and always will be, if Mike has anything to say about it.

He goes in first, crawling into the structure that was the first real home El ever knew. Her eyes are starting to adjust, at least enough for her to make out Mike's hand that's reaching for her, blindly trying to find his girl in the darkness. Using his arm as a guide, she settles herself among the blankets and pillow so that she's facing him. Her heart leaps when he shifts closer to her and wraps his arms around her shoulders, pulling her as close to him as possible. Her legs entangle themselves with his and she puts her arms around his waist, clinging to his clothes and burying her face in his chest as she snuggles in closer. She feels him leave a kiss on top of her head and she sighs, shutting her eyes.

A feeling of security and comfort has overcome both of them. They've longed for this since they first had to watch their friend go through an intense amount of pain earlier that day and they're just so thankful that they can finally rest. At least for tonight, they can finally rest in the safety of each other's arms. Because that's where they belong.

13. 13: Protect

It's Saturday morning and Mike can feel his smile growing as they near the cabin. The wind is whipping through his hair as he pedals strong and fast along the dirt path, his friends following close behind. They had the day off from school yesterday and the sleepover the boys held in the Wheeler basement was epic, but he couldn't stop thinking about her (what else is new). He had been looking forward to spending today with her since they planned this last Monday. Several times, his friends caught him staring off into space, a dreamy expression on his face, and it took everything in them to restrain from relentlessly teasing their completely smitten friend.

His excitement grows and bubbles in his chest as they pull up to the cabin and he hops off his bike, making sure to shove it under the porch, just as a precaution, and his friends follow suit. He can't contain his grin at this point and dashes up the steps, taking a breath to compose himself, before he lifts up his hand and knocks twice, once, then three times.

He hears the locks click open almost immediately and when the door opens, his arms open with it, ready to catch her as always. "Mike," he hears El's voice whisper and he barely gets a look at her face, before she runs straight into his arms and wraps him in an embrace. His heart swells and he buries his face in her hair, knowing full well he'll never get tired of this, or of her, for that matter.

However, it takes him a second to realize that she's holding him differently today than she normally does. Her hands are grasping a little tighter at his shirt and she's pressed herself a little farther against him than usual. And...is she shaking?

He slips an arm off her shoulders to motion subtly to his friends behind his back to go into the cabin. He ignores their grumbles as they move past them, quickly saying their greetings to El, before settling themselves inside and shutting the door behind them.

He turns his attention back to the girl clinging to him and he tightens his embrace, finally having a guess as to what happened to her. There are only a couple situations in which he can feel her distress this

strongly and he thinks he knows which one this is.

"What was it about?" he whispers. She takes a moment and he waits patiently before she quietly responds. "Mama." "Do you want to talk about this one?" She shakes her head and he nods, gently scratching her back as she exhales. He promised one night that he would always hold her for as long as she needed him to and then some, and right now is no exception.

They stand there in each other's arms until El finally calms down and takes a step back, wiping at her eyes. He watches her intently as she pieces herself back together. She looks darling today, just like she does everyday, and Mike sneaks one moment to admire her standing here with the sun highlighting her features. He feels bad, because she's hurting and now isn't the time for that, but when she catches him staring, she smiles, albeit a little wobbly, for the first time since they got there. "Today's going to help you forget about last night, I promise," he tells her, meaning every word. They've got a great day planned ahead of them and he cannot wait to see her in a lighter mood. Stupid nightmares...

Poking his head into the cabin, he calls, "Alright guys, let's get going!", pretending he didn't just see Dustin and Lucas digging through Hopper's fridge. They all rush to the door excitedly, pulling on their jackets and their shoes before sprinting down the steps and out to their bikes. "Where are we going?" El pipes up as they all scramble onto their modes of transportation. "Nowhere Hopper doesn't want you, don't worry," Will replies and she nods, satisfied as she climbs onto the back of Mike's bike. When her arms go around his waist, he can't help the butterflies that soar through his stomach or blush that creeps onto his cheeks and he has to fight to focus on the path in front of him.

They reach their destination in record time and El gasps as they slide off the back. "Castle Byers!" she exclaims and the rest of the boys grin proudly. "Yeah, and there's food and a D&D campaign waiting for us inside," Dustin tells her. "Are you in?" She nods and Mike blows out a breath in relief. They had set this up last night and he had been sure she'd be down for it, but after seeing where she was at mentally this morning, he wasn't so confident about that. But she enters the fort excitedly and the boys follow her. It's a bit cramped for all of them to

be in there at once, but they didn't mind. If anything, it makes them feel safer, since these woods have a reputation of holding mysterious beings that they do not feel like facing now. Or ever.

Mike takes a seat and opens his manual, flipping through his notes to find where they had left off last time, before they had dragged everything out here. Dustin pops open a can of soda and Lucas and Will chatter way about this latest campaign, recounting everything they had done so far. El sits down on a pillow beside Mike, peering over his shoulder at the map he was examining. He'd explained the basics of this game to her the best he could and she understood it to an extent, but she always preferred hanging back and watching him tell a story, a preference that made him grin like an idiot when he thought about it. "Ah, found it!" he says, pinpointing their location. "Okay, this is where we are. The party has found themselves in the Cave of Thorns, shivering from the rain falling outside. Things were going well, until a troll appeared and trapped Dustin in a corner." Dustin swears loudly. "I forgot about that! Uh...okay, I thrust at it with my torch to set it on fire," he declares, rolling the dice.

And just like that, they were off and Mike's mind is thrust into this fantasy world, his thoughts racing as he guides his party through mountains and castles and adventure after adventure. He loves this. Storytelling is his creative avenue and he loves watching this plot unravel. The characters of his friends are depending on him to lead them and lead them he does.

At one point, he subconsciously reaches out to take El's hand and his words are halted when his wrist hits something cold and plastic on her wrist as he tangles his fingers with hers. He glances down at her hand and almost laughs when he sees what's peeking out from under her sleeve. He was wondering where that went.

"Is that...is that my watch?" he asks her quietly, with a grin. "Yes," she says simply, looking up at him. When he doesn't respond, too swept up in the fact that she wanted his watch back on her wrist, her face falls and she lifts her other hand to the clasp keeping it secure. "Oh no, El keep it, it's find!" he frantically reassures her, squeezing her hand. He was more than happy to let her have it, since he knows how much sentimental value has been placed on it. She smiles and says, "It covers up..." before her sentence drifts off and she nuzzles her face

in his shoulder. 'She's using my watch to cover up a mark from her childhood that she hates,' he thinks, his head spinning at the significance that holds as he leans his cheek against the top of her head.

It takes a great deal of effort for him to get back into the role of Dungeon Master after that, and he's constantly distracted by her warmth as she rests contently against him. It's a nice contrast from the cool afternoon breeze that's settling in the fort and he's beginning to hope that the rest of the party will get cold and want to go home, leaving him a little bit of snuggle time with El, when they hear a noise come from outside Castle Byers.

As soon as they hear the twig snap, Mike shuts his mouth and the rest of the party freezes. An icy dread coats the air as everyone remains unmoving, not sure what to do.

Then, there's a footstep. It's faint and sounds somewhat distant, but it's there. El's body stiffens and she sits up, rigid as a board. Her face is a mask of panic and he rubs his thumb against her hand, before breathlessly whispering, "Go sit behind Lucas," who's seated at the back of the structure. 'She needs to be as far away from the entrance as possible,' he thinks, his protective instincts kicking in. She swallows and squeezes his hand, before rising to her feet and, as silently and stealthily as she can, she makes her way over to Lucas, who scoots up to make room for her. Mike shifts, so he's directly in front of the door, his back to the entrance. If anyone wants to get to his friends, they would have to go through him first.

There's more than one pair of footsteps, that much is clear now. Whether it's a human or not, they still can't tell, but whatever it is, it can't be good. They're getting closer, they realize when there's a crunch of leaves much louder than the noises they had heard before. Crapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrap...

He glances back at El and sees that his name is on her lips and the fear is evident on her face, on all their faces, really. His hands ball into fists and he knows he shouldn't risk peeking outside, but his eyes flicker to a sliver in the wall to his right anyway. To his relief, he doesn't see anything, but the rock sitting outside gives him an idea.

He leans over to Dustin and whispers, "Tell El to lift something outside with her mind. Maybe it'll scare whatever's out there away." His eyes widen and he motions to El. She silently inches forward, and Dustin repeats what Mike told her (he hopes) in her ear. Her eyebrows set in determination and she nods, sitting up a little straighter. She shuts her eyes and they watch, barely breathing as the footsteps grow louder.

Suddenly, her eyes shoot open and she jerks her head, followed by a loud THUD. They hear a woman scream and a man yell, "What the hell?" before El raises her hand and the people outside fall silent for a second, before there's the sound of rapid, heavy footsteps as the two turn and sprint for their lives, the woman yelling, "This town is haunted!" They listen as their intruders run farther and farther away, until they're left with only the birds chirping innocently.

Life rushes back into the group in an instant, as they all blow out their breaths and excitedly begin discussing what had just happened. "Man, that was AWESOME!" Lucas exclaims, high-fiving El as Will asks, "Mike, what'd you tell her to do?" And Dustin just laughs, giving El a high-five of his own as she passes him, making her way back to her spot beside Mike. He puts an arm around her when she plops down next to him. "I told Dustin to tell her to move something around outside to scare them off, but...what'd you actually do?" he asks, noting the confused look on her face. "Oh. Dustin told me to make them fly," she says and Mike glares at Dustin, who just shrugs his shoulders with a grin. "I compromised," she continues, only stumbling slightly at the unfamiliar word. "I made one of them fall." She uses her fingers to mime swiping the man's feet up and him falling to the ground. "But they didn't leave, so I made a stick fly. Then they ran," she finishes.

He squeezes her shoulders to show his gratitude and she beams at him. He hadn't even realized he'd been staring at her, until Will clears his throat. "Don't you guys think we should get out of here, though? Who knows who those people might tell about this," he says and Mike nods his head. "You're right, let's go," he tells them, standing up, and they all rush to do as much cleaning up as they can, before they exit the fort and hop onto their bikes.

His first instinct is to drop El back off at Hopper's house, but the little

voice in the back of his head reminds him they very well could be under surveillance right now and he'd rather not give away the location of the secret cabin. So he heads towards the police station, figuring they could leave her with him. It's getting pretty late at this point and Hopper probably wants her back for dinner anyways.

No such luck. "He just left, said he was heading to the Wheeler household," his sarcastic secretary informs them. "Seemed pretty ticked at something, if you ask me." "Did he happen to say why?" Dustin asks and Mike exchanges worried glances with all of them. "Hop's always ticked at something," Flo replies, rolling her eyes. "No, I mean, did he say why he was headed to the Wheeler's?" "Well, he was muttering something about 'those dang kids', but that could mean anyone."

By the time she's finished her sentence, the kids have already raced out the door. "Go go go go go!" Dustin is ordering and there's a mad rush to once again mount their bikes and they head straight for Mike's house, pedaling as fast as they can. They know they couldn't get there before the chief, but the sooner they could get there and get El back to him in time for her curfew, the better. And Mike just prays no one told him about the incident in the woods.

Sure enough, Hopper's police car is sitting in the Wheeler driveway when they finally arrive. They dump their bikes outside the basement door and wait impatiently as Mike scrambles to unlock it. The door finally swings open, and they pile into the Wheeler basement, headed straight for the stairs. Mike volunteers to go first, with El close behind, so the chief will see immediately that his daughter's okay.

"El, there you are, thank goodness," Hopper says when they emerge from the basement. He's standing in the kitchen, most likely making idle chatter with Mike's mom while he waited for them to show up. How he knew they would come here, the kids have no idea. "How was the day?" Mike silently breathes a sigh of relief that the first question he asked wasn't "What the heck were you thinking, using your powers around other people?" "Good. We played D&D in Castle Byers," she replies, going to give him a hug.

"You should be proud of her, chief. She saved us this afternoon."

Mike's stomach drops and his eyes grow wide as he turns to stare at Lucas. Dustin and Will have the same look of dismay on their faces and Lucas quickly slaps his hand over his mouth, realizing his mistake.

Hopper's eyebrows raise. "Oh really? How so?" he questions and El takes a moment to glare at Lucas before taking a step back from Hopper. "I was just trying to save my friends," she says defiantly. Mike is expertly avoiding the chief's gaze, which does nothing to divert his suspicion. "Eleven," he says, his gruff voice now turning into a warning. "What. Happened."

"I...they...Mike...um..." El stutters, now training her eyes on the ground and whatever courage she had the moment before was now gone, leaving her looking timid and vulnerable standing next to the chief. Mike finally finds his voice and comes to her rescue. "Hopper, it was my fault. There were some people walking in the woods close to Castle Byers and I was so afraid they were coming for us. I...I told El to use her powers to scare them off. And she did. Please don't be mad at her."

He was expecting Hopper to immediately reprimand El for her actions, despite him begging him not to, but instead, Hopper's expression grows dark and his jaw clenches as he stares at him. "Let me get this straight. You made this girl, who was locked up for twelve years with people who only wanted her for her powers and who constantly ordered her to use them to their benefit, use her powers for YOUR own good? Wheeler, I thought you of all people would know better!"

"She used them for her own good too, not just ours! She has the right to protect herself!" Mike fires back, hardly believing what he was hearing. "She doesn't need anyone to tell her when to protect herself!" Hopper shoots right back. "But me asking her to do that didn't hurt her! Right El?" She hadn't been bothered by it in the moment and she knew he was just trying to protect them. At least, that's what he's been telling himself.

However, that whole perspective changes when he sees the hurt flash through El's eyes when she looks up at him. She bites her lip and Mike feels like crying. He had hurt her. He had hurt her without

realizing it. His intention wasn't to use her, but he hadn't considered the possibility that she would take his actions the wrong way.

"El?" he says again, trying to get some sign that there were no hard feelings against him, but everything about her posture and her expression says otherwise. Crap...

"It doesn't matter now," she says quietly. "And besides, Dustin told me to make them fly." She throws Dustin a glare and Mike's mouth drops open, wondering how he hadn't caught how she felt about this in the moment.

Hopper turns to El and puts his hands on his hips. "And did you?" he asks rather forcefully. "I...I made the man fall over, not fly," she responds crossing her arms. They flinch as Hopper throws up his hands. "El, what were you thinking? Who knows who those people might've told about that! You are fully capable of making your own decisions and that was a very, very stupid decision!" "But I kept us safe," she growls, staring him down. "Yeah, by putting yourself in more danger!" he practically yells at her.

Mike hates this. He absolutely hates having to watch this. "Hopper, would you quit throwing all the blame on her? I was the idiot who told her to do that, which by the way El, I'm really sorr-"

She cuts him off mid sentence. "They didn't even see me!" she forcefully tells Hopper. "That is true, chief. We stayed in the fort the whole time," Dustin bravely pipes up from behind Mike, Hopper fires back, saying, "Stay out of this, Henderson, you've done enough! And it doesn't matter if no one saw you, those people felt your powers and that's bad enough! People at the lab are good at connecting the dots and with your reckless actions, you should be lucky they haven't already found you and tried to take you back!"

That one stung. Mike can see it in El's face. The thought of losing El to the bad men is more than he can bear, and he can only imagine what emotions that sparked in her. There's a heavy, electrified silence hanging in the air as El and Hopper stare each other down, El trying desperately to hide her tears.

"I. Was. Protecting. My. Friends!" she yells suddenly and as her anger

is unleashed, her powers come to life. The lamp sitting on the table next to Lucas and Will is suddenly, violently blown apart and the lampshade hits Will square in the head while the glass from the light bulb scrapes against Lucas's skin, causing him to cry out.

"Oh, Lucas sweetie, let's get you cleaned up," Mike's mom says and everyone jumps, forgetting she was there. She whisks Lucas off to the bathroom and the others are left standing in a stunned silence. "Eleven. We're going home. Now." Hopper's tone is menacing, dark, threatening and Mike very much wishes he will never hear him use it again. As El passes him on her way to the door, he reaches out to touch her hand, trying to offer the little comfort he can in this situation, but she subtly pulls her hand back and shoves it in her pocket. Her head hangs low as Hopper marches her out of the Wheeler house and Mike is left standing, shocked, in his kitchen with the feeling that his heart was breaking right in two.

The second they get home, she heads straight for her room, telepathically slamming the door and throwing herself onto her bed.

She was beyond angry. She was furious and frustrated beyond belief. How dare Hopper accuse her friends. How dare he not understand that it was only to protect the people she cares about. And how dare Dustin lie to her about what Mike had told her to do. And Mike...how dare he...no, she can't start thinking like that. He hadn't meant to hurt her.

She honestly is dumbfounded at how quickly things got out of hand. All had been fine until Lucas had opened his mouth. And now she has no idea how to fix any of this and that sends an awful, twisting feeling through her stomach. She slams her face into her pillow with a groan, convinced she can't do anything right.

There's a knock on her door a little later and she immediately mumbles, "Not now, Hopper." "El?" She sits up suddenly, her eyes wide. "El, it's...it's Mike." Her heart clenches and she bites her lip. "Can I come in?" She wants to say yes. Her first instinct is to say yes. But she forces herself to hesitate, because Mike coming in means talking it out, which means probably getting angrier than she already is and that would lead to taking the risk of losing her temper and

doing something stupid that would most likely hurt him. And she's convinced that she's done that enough today.

So, with regret filling her heart, she says, "No, Mike. Go away. I'm sorry." There's a silence outside her door and her eyes involuntarily well up at what she had just said out loud, hoping she'll never have to say that again. She jumps when he tries the doorknob and can hear his sigh of defeat when he finds it's locked. "Please El, I want to help you fix this. And...and I'm not leaving here until you at least let me talk to you," his voice says, strong and defiant.

She can't. She can't talk to him, at least not right now. And she absolutely hates it, but she makes herself stay silent by burying her face back into her pillow. He'll leave eventually. He has to. Gosh, she just wants this day to be over.

It's about six in the afternoon at this point and she's starting to get hungry, but she doesn't feel like facing Hopper at all for the rest of the day, figuring it would be better to let both of them cool off first. So she stays in her room, attempting to read one of the chapter books her friends had picked up from the library. It successfully gets her mind off things, but she soon grows tired of it as the sun goes down, signaling an end to the day. Switching on her light, she grabs her sketchbook and lazily doodles in it until she glances at the clock and is surprised to see it's already time for her to go to bed. The events of the day have finally stopped nagging at her conscious and she allows herself to drift off to a restless slumber after flicking off her lights, her sketchbook still in her hand.

She's been asleep for a good while, when her stomach decides to start rumbling, complaining that she never ate anything for dinner. She drowsily opens her eyes and glances at the clock to see it reads 11:24. She sighs in exasperation as she hears another growl come insistently from her stomach. Realizing she won't be able to fall back asleep until she eats something, she silently slides out of bed and tiptoes to the door, praying that Hopper isn't still awake. She turns the knob as quietly as she can and is about to step into the darkened cabin, when her eyes glance down at the floor. A gasp escapes her lips and she slaps a hand over her mouth at the sight in front of her.

He never left. Mike was lying fast asleep on the floor right outside

her door, with a pillow under his head that she recognizes as one of Hopper's. He wasn't kidding-he really wasn't going to leave until he could help her. It wasn't exactly a promise, but whatever it was, Mike hadn't broken it and she's hit with a wave of admiration and adoration for this boy, something that seems to be happening a lot lately. She leans against her doorframe, soaking in the sight of him sleeping, before running back inside her room and grabbing a blanket from her bed. Not caring if Hopper finds them like this, she lays down next to him, tossing the blanket over them both and scooting as close to him as possible. Hoping this doesn't wake him up, she tentatively slips her fingers through his and holds fast to his hand as she quickly falls back into a deep sleep, so incredibly grateful that he was still here.

What she doesn't know is that Mike refused to move from his spot outside her door, even when Hopper threatened to literally drag him outside. They had had a quiet, heated argument that ended in Hopper finally agreeing to let him stay, when he saw how persistent Mike was...

"Kid, I mean it, just go home. You can't do anything for her now."

"I'm not breaking my word, Hopper. I said I wouldn't leave and I'm not going to now."

"She fell asleep!"

"But she'll wake up in the morning and I want to be here."

"What if I just told her you were going to stay, but I made you leave? Which, by the way, I'm very close to doing."

"No. I'm going to stay here until I can at least talk to her."

"Kid, I literally drag you outside if you don't get outta my house!"

"You think El would forgive you for that?"

Hopper hesitates, dragging a hand down his face.

"Alright, Mike. You're almost fifteen and you're standing up to the chief of police and doing something selfless for a girl. Tell me

truthfully, why are you still here?"

Mike scoffs and words begin flying out of his mouth.

"Do I really have to spell it out for you that I love her, Hopper? Can you really not see how deeply I care for this girl? Have you already forgotten how much I suffered when the universe ripped us apart and you, YOU did everything in your power to keep it that way?" He's angry now, but it's mixed with a passion that makes him say things that he didn't even know had once been strings of thoughts in his mind. "Yes, I love your daughter. I loved your daughter before you even called her that. I loved your daughter the minute I found her shivering, half scared to death in the woods. Hopper, El is my world. She was my world before you even knew there was a girl out there named El."

He begins to ramble, but he doesn't care. Someone might as well know the truth. "There are sides of her that you'll never see, because I'm the only person she trusts enough to show those sides to. Can you believe that, this beautiful girl actually trusts ME. What did I do to deserve that? What did I do to deserve seeing her brown eyes turn towards me with so much feeling and emotion, it makes my stomach do somersaults? Gosh, I want to give her the universe, because that's what she deserves. All I want is for El to be happy and safe. She's so unbelievably important to me.

And that, Hopper, is why I'm still here and why I intend to stay here until I can help fix what I started. And trust me, I'll be patient. I've had a lot of experience in waiting for El."

Hopper couldn't think of a single argument against that.

Mike had sat there until his eyes started drooping and he had curled up on the wooden floor, with the pillow the chief had thrown him, determined to keep his word.

What she also doesn't know is he'll wake up halfway through the night to find her asleep beside him, with her hand, the one with his infamous watch wrapped around it, clasping his and his heart will almost burst with love. He'll scoot closer to her, leaving a gentle kiss on the back of her hand, admiring the faint, content smile adorning

her lips.

And in the morning, she'll finally sort out her emotions when she's calm enough to talk it out and he'll patiently listen to everything she says. He'll apologize for what he had done and she'll apologize profusely for her actions as well. He'll help her realize any anger left over had now dissolved and that she was ready to make things right again. Hand in hand, he'll stand by her side as she apologizes to everyone she had hurt the previous day and she'll be overwhelmed with the compassion and forgiveness the people she loves will happily offer her.

A/N: Shoutout to PLASMAHOUND, who wanted to see something with Hopper and Mike's relationship; I tried to sprinkle in a little bit of that in here as well.

Also, thank you so much for over a hundred favorites and followers! I love you all!

14. 14: Christmas

A low voice eases her into consciousness that morning.

"El...El...Kid, wake up...El...

It's Christmas morning."

Her eyes shoot open at that to reveal Hopper standing over her, his hand on her shoulder. It's Christmas morning. A rush of joy and giddiness hits her and she breaks out in a grin. It looks like she had been able to fall asleep after all last night, after tossing and turning in anticipation for this day to come. It's Christmas morning!

She bounces out of bed and gives Hopper a big hug around his middle. "Christmas!" she exclaims and he chuckles as he hugs her back. "Yeah, Christmas. Now, get dressed and we'll head over to the Wheeler's soon, alright?" She nods her head, her wild mop of curls bouncing with her enthusiasm and he smiles before he turns and leaves her room.

So this is what it feels like to wake up on Christmas morning. Mike had tried to explain this sensation to her, but she fully understands now. Her chest has a fizzing elation swirling around it and she feels like singing out loud right now. She settles for quietly humming that one Christmas carol about a reindeer she heard on the radio as she pulls on her clothes for the day, smiling when she hears the sound of pancakes being flipped.

They eat breakfast quickly and El can't stop chatting about the day to come. "They said we were going sled-ding near his house," she's in the middle of telling him, as she wolfs down her eggs. "And where are you going to get a sled for that?" Hopper asks, raising his eyebrows. "Lucas said he has an extra. And Mike said I could share his if I wanted," she replies, the butterflies growing stronger as she pictured flying down a hill, clinging to Mike and spending the afternoon with her friends, without a care in the world. When Hopper opens his mouth to retort, as she knew he would, she looks him square in the eye and simply says, "It's Christmas," because this special day is finally here and she's planning on being by Mike's side

for as long as she can today, whether he likes it or not.

As they finish up, El runs back to her room to throw on her coat and peeks outside to see thick snowflakes fluttering softly to the ground. Her breath fogs up the window as she gazes at the white blanket that covered the land while she slept last night. She smiles and turns to scoop up the present that's been sitting by her bed for a week, planting a tiny kiss on it as she heads for the door.

The party had agreed not to get gifts for each other this year, since they blew every last penny on games at the arcade and they were still too young to have jobs. But not getting one for Mike wasn't an option in El's mind. He had given her so much and she knew she could never repay him, but she could still try. And besides, she can't wait to see the look on his face.

Hopper's already gotten the car started by the time she walks out of the cabin, her boots crunching on the snow-covered ground, the snowflakes immediately sticking to her hair. He brushes them off of her curls as she climbs into the front seat and she scrunches her nose playfully in return. He flips on the radio and they spend the car ride singing off key to their favorite Christmas carols and laughing when they completely screw up the words.

She can't contain her excitement when they finally pull up to the Wheeler household and she leaps out of the car the second it stops. By the time Hopper gets out of the driver's seat, she's already rung the doorbell, taking a step back and fiddling nervously with her coat sleeves. The door swings open a few moments later to reveal Mrs. Wheeler, who smiles brightly and wipes her hands on her apron. A wonderful aroma seeps out into the crisp winter air and El takes a deep breath in, her stomach growling, despite just having breakfast a few minutes ago. "Good morning Eleanor, it's nice to see you!" she says. She had heard Mike talk about El for so long, that it only made sense to keep her confusion to a minimum and stick with a name that would decrease her suspicion of the nickname her son had given her. Because she doesn't know the full story, and everyone involved plans on keeping it that way.

"Merry Christmas Karen," Hopper says, coming up behind El. "Thanks for letting us crash your party." "My pleasure!" she responds and El is

about to ask where her favorite person in the world is, when she answers that question in her next sentence. "Mike's been begging me to have Eleanor over for Christmas since the beginning of this month, if you can believe it." She has no problem believing that. "He's still asleep upstairs, but you're welcome to wait in the living room."

By the time she gets to the word "welcome", El has already entered the house and is headed straight for the staircase, after placing her presents under the tree. She ignores Hopper's protests behind her and silently climbs up the steps to the second floor, tiptoeing to his room. She pauses outside his door, taking a moment to relish in the anticipation of seeing him, because she's here and it's Christmas morning and he's on the other side of this barrier and all she has to do is knock. She lets the excitement fizz and bubble in her chest before finally, she lifts her hand. Knock knock. Knock. Knock knock knock.

There's a brief moment of silence in which she holds her breath, before she hears a sleepy "Come in, El." She happily turns the knob and steps into his room, the familiarity of it making a warm, fuzzy feeling spread throughout her. This, and the blanket fort downstairs are hands-down her two favorite places to be. Her eyes land on him laying in his bed immediately and her heart swells at the sight of him still trying to wake up. She shuts the door behind her and tiptoes to his bedside. He flops over from his stomach to his back so he can see her more clearly and yawns, rubbing at his eyes. "Good morning," he murmurs and reaches his hand out to her. She smiles softly and kneels down by his bed, clasping her hand around his as a comfortable silence stretches between the two. Rubbing her thumb against the back of his hand, she lifts her other hand to lovingly brush away the hair that falls over his eyes. He smiles at the contact and watches her through half-lidded eyes as she strokes his hair with her fingers, tracing lazy trails along his scalp like he's done to her countless times before, and finding they way he's slowly blinking absolutely adorable. She wants so badly to curl up beside him and take him in her arms, but there are presents waiting for them downstairs, and she knows if she did that, she'd never want to leave.

She's skimming her thumb along his cheek, marveling at how soft his skin is and making her way back up to his hairline, when his eyes

suddenly widen and his body tenses. "Mike, what's wrong?" she asks immediately, panic flooding into her body. But it all fades away when a grin spreads across his face. With an energized tone, he whispers, "Today's Christmas!" and she smiles and nods her head, happy to see his brain has finally woken up fully.

He sits up and kicks off his blankets, just as excited as she was. She quickly pecks him on the cheek, before rising to her feet and saying, "I'll wait for you outside, okay?" "Okay," he responds with a nod and she smiles at him before she heads for the door. "El?" She turns around. "Yes?" "I'm so glad you're here," he tells her with a sincerity that makes her stomach flip. "I am too," she replies and takes one last moment to soak him in, before she exits his room to give him some privacy.

She meant that. She's so insanely glad that she's here, in this house, on this morning, with this boy, and soon with all her friends.

Once he's dressed, he exits his room and takes her by the hand, intertwining their fingers as she practically drags him down the stairs. Her enthusiasm is childish, sure, but no one even thinks to judge her as she takes a seat right by the Christmas tree, sneaking a peek at the presents wrapped neatly underneath it.

Someone clears their throat. "Merry Christmas to you too, El," she hears and she finally notices Dustin and his mom are sitting on the couch. She grins and stands up, going to hug her friend. "Merry Christmas Dustin," she replies and as soon as the words are out of her mouth, the doorbell rings. Pretty soon, the Byers' are piling into the house, followed quickly by the Sinclair's, who have brought Max with them. It all happens so fast, but suddenly, everyone she cares about is standing in the same room, chatting away with one another. She's giving out hugs left and right, talking with everyone she can and soaking in the cheerfulness that comes with this day.

After a while, she finds herself beside Hopper and discreetly tugs on his sleeve. When he glances down at her, she says, "Presents?" because they're just sitting there under the tree begging to be opened and she's getting impatient. He sighs and ruffles her hair, but when he says nothing, she adds on, "Please?" "Okay, kid," he finally replies and calls into the crowd, "El's ready to open presents, does anyone

else want to?" "Is that even a question?" is Max's immediate reply and the party scrambles to the tree while everyone else slowly finishes their conversations and finds a seat around the living room.

The next half hour is organized chaos as gifts are exchanged, wrapping paper is thrown, kids are screaming when they see what they got, some tears are shed when heartfelt cards are read and hugs that could classify as tackling are given out of gratitude.

However, no one could have possibly been more excited than Michael Wheeler when he opened an Atari. El hears his cry of enthusiasm and rushes to his side immediately to see what he got, only to peer at the box in confusion as the rest of his friends congratulate him like he just won a prize. "It's a gaming system!" he explains quickly to her, before he goes to thank his parents profusely. "Just wait until you play this, you're gonna love it!" Will says to her as he reads the side of the box and she smiles at him, already looking forward to learning how this gadget works.

Things are finally starting to die down and Mike is sitting with El in the corner as they flip through the "Everything You Need To Know About Star Wars" book Hopper had given her when, out of the blue, Mrs. Wheeler says, "Mike, would you like to open El's gift?"

El's stomach drops as she feels her face heat up and her eyes grow wide. She hadn't meant for the rest of her friends to know she had gotten a present just for him and she *really* hadn't meant for him to open it in front of everyone. Biting her lip, she sneaks a glance at the people gathered around the living room, inwardly cringing at how many of them are just staring at the two of them. She forces herself to look at Mike and is expecting anything but the expression on his face that she finds.

He looks surprised, but she recognizes a hint of something else. He almost looks...relieved and she touches his arm lightly. "M...Mike?" she whispers, her eyes darting around his face. "I...um...I got you something too, El," he says, a gentle smile creeping onto his face. It wasn't like there was a weight sitting in her chest, but whatever bad feeling had settled itself there was now disappearing as she feels herself light up.

They silently come to an agreement just by reading each other that neither of them want anyone else to be there when they exchange gifts, so Mike leans over and whispers "Later?" in her ear and she grins up at him as she replies, "Later."

Later doesn't come until the end of the day, after El has had one of the most amazing holidays of her life. She eats so much food, she feels like she's about to explode, she plays Atari with her friends until her eyes glaze over, and she laughs so much, her stomach hurts. And on top of everything, she's the most relaxed she's been in a long time. No one has any responsibilities to worry about and everyone in the Wheeler household is content right where they are, surrounded by the people they've come to call family over the past couple of years. For a whole twenty-four hours, everyone is focused solely on being with each other and it leaves her feeling loved immensely. These are her people and this is her home.

But the best part is that the day ends with a moment that she will cherish for the rest of her life...

"I don't think I've ever been colder," Dustin declares as the six of them trudge through the Wheeler front door, kicking off their snow boots and throwing their snow-covered jackets on the floor, much to Mrs. Wheeler's dismay. "What about that one time I pushed you into the river?" Will offers with a smug grin and El watches as Dustin's face goes from confusion to horror to resolution. "Yeah, you're right, that was worse. I couldn't feel my fingers for an hour!" he replies dramatically and beside her, Mike rolls his eyes. "You ended up pulling all of us in, remember? It wasn't that bad!" he shoots back at his friend with a grin as they make their way to the living room.

They had just gotten back from the sledding hill, where they had spent their time building the coolest ramps they could out of the snow and racing each other over and over again down the hill, until they were panting from the amount of times they had to climb back up to the top. A light snowfall had begun to descend by then and the sun was threatening to slip behind the horizon, so they had called it a day, walking back to Mike's in a good spirits. Their bodies however were absolutely freezing and the heat from indoors was much appreciated.

"Kids, come grab some hot chocolate!" Mrs. Wheeler calls from the kitchen and they immediately perk up, El especially, having recently discovered the perfection that is Karen's hot chocolate. "Hey El, would you grab me a cup?" Mike asks as he heads over to the fireplace, kneeling in front of it to start the fire. She nods and happily enters the kitchen, where she finds six mugs sitting on the counter, the steam rising subtly making her mouth water. Slipping in front of her friends, she manages to snag the two with the most whipped cream on them, earning her a round of good-natured teasing from the rest of the gang.

The fire is crackling and the lights have been dimmed when she returns to the living room, making the Christmas tree cast a gentle glow on the walls. With the snow falling outside the window, it looks like something off of a postcard.

Mike has settled himself on the couch with a thick blanket wrapped tightly around his shoulders and he smiles when she enters the room, beckoning her over. She hands him one of the mugs she's holding, but is surprised when he sets it down on the coffee table in front of the couch. He looks back up at her and, clutching the end of the blanket, stretches out his arm to create a space for her to snuggle up against him. She smiles and happily accepts his invitation, sitting down beside him and he wraps his arms, as well as the blanket, around her. But before he fully pulls her against him, he gives her a line of soft, tender kisses, starting at her shoulder and slowly pressing his lips along her neck, ending with a peck on her cheek that makes her shiver and his actions warm her up quicker than the chocolaty goodness she's holding ever could.

She settles back against him, pulling her knees up, and he envelops her in his arms, the blanket creating a cocoon for the two of them to rest in together. Her head rests against his chest and she listens to his heart softly thrumming underneath her ear as she sips on her hot chocolate, smiling softly when she realizes their breaths have become synchronized.

They stay nestled against each other like that for a while, gazing lazily at the Christmas tree and listening to the hushed conversations of the rest of their friends. When she finishes the drink in her hand, she levitates the now-empty mug over to the coffee table, enjoying

the way Mike chuckles at that and rotates so she can wrap her arms around his chest, burrowing further into his side and he pulls the blanket tighter around them, laying his cheek on top of her head. She sighs contently, wishing she could stay right here forever, knowing full well that if she did, she'd never get tired of this.

After a little while, Jonathan pokes his head up from the basement and calls, "Hey boys! And...girls," he adds on sheepishly. "We're playing Atari down here, you guys want to join?" There's a chorus of whoops and hollers as their friends pop up from their spots around the living room and rush to the basement steps to join the teenagers and whoever else happens to be down there. Mike, however, doesn't even budge. Not because El wouldn't let him, but because he legitimately would rather stay here than go join everyone else downstairs. And suddenly...they're alone for the first time since this morning. There's a content silence, if you ignore the random shouts of excitement coming from the basement, and Mike is tracing lazy circles on El's back when she realizes something. "Mike?" she whispers and he hums in response. "Is it later now?" She tilts her head up to watch a grin light up his face. "Yeah, you're right. It is," he replies, squeezing her shoulders and she kisses the underside of his jaw before he releases her, both of them standing up, El headed for the tree and Mike headed for his room.

They meet back up on the stairs, each of them shyly hiding their presents behind their back. "Do you want to go first?" he asks as they take a seat on the steps and she nods, taking a breath and handing the gift bag to him. She finds she's nervous for a split second as he rustles around in the bag, his hand swimming through the tissue paper, before he finds what he's looking for. The look on his face when he pulls it out lights up her entire world.

It's a picture of just the two of them in a frame Hopper had lying around the cabin. Jonathan took it the night of the Snow Ball and once she found out he had it, she begged him to give it to her, knowing right away she wanted to give it to Mike.

That entire night, their hands had remained clasped together, after they finally left the dance floor, happy as can be. That's the first thing she likes about this picture; they're standing side by side, their fingers laced together. The second thing she likes about this picture is it was

taken the split second after he said something to her that made her smile. This moment, forever frozen in time, shows her staring up at him with a smile adorning her lips and he's staring straight into her eyes, with a grin that makes her heart flip-flop, even though it's a picture. They're clearly lost in each other and she's so grateful Jonathan managed to capture that emotion.

"El...I...I love it!" he manages to get out, looking back up at her, his eyes dancing. "It's so...us. You know?" Yes. Yes, she does know. That picture depicts them perfectly and she has wanted him to have it ever since she knew it existed. "Thank you so much, I'm going to keep this forever," he tells her and she bows her head, hearing how truly grateful he was in his voice. "You're welcome," she replies, that fizzy sensation exploding in her body. "Do you want to come choose where it goes?" he asks and she nods her head, taking his hand that he offers to help her stand up.

Once they're in his room, she knows exactly where it should go. She takes the frame from his hand and walks over to his dresser, placing it right beside his science fair trophy, the one with the picture she had pointed to that one day a couple years ago. He'll be able to see it every morning when he wakes up and he squeezes her hand as she beams up at him.

"And...um...this is for you," he says quietly, letting go of her fingers to slip the small black box he's been holding into her hand. He seems nervous, as he immediately starts fidgeting with the end of his sleeves now that his hands are free. She smiles at him to get him to relax, and turns her attention back to the box she's holding. Excitement is swirling in her chest as she finally takes off the lid and...

Her breath catches in her throat. It's absolutely stunning.

Inside, resting on a little pillow, is a diamond-studded hair clip that sparkles when she moves it side to side. On the very end of it is the shiny outline of a heart and, best of all, resting inside that heart is a silver E. It's perfect and she feels a lump form in her throat as she gazes at what she's holding. "Mike," she whispers shakily, unable to find any other words. He says nothing, just picks up the clip and opens the clasp, his eyes landing on a spot just above her ear.

Stepping in closer, he takes a lock of her hair in his fingers and slips the clip around it, closing it gently. His fingers brush her cheek as he lowers them. "Beautiful," he murmurs and she doesn't even try to stop the tears that fall from her eyelashes when she blinks. The emotions that are coursing throughout her body right now are overwhelmingly strong and they make words begin to tumble from her mouth.

"Mike, I love you," she blurts out suddenly. She watches as a blush spreads across his cheeks and his gaze turns downwards, a dopey grin turning up the corners of his lips. But it's not good enough. He needs to know the full truth. The extent of her feelings for him are far beyond her ability to comprehend them at this point, much less her ability to put them into words, but she sure as heck is going to try anyway.

"Mike, I'm serious," she says, lifting her hands to cradle his face and return his eyes back to hers. She fights the urge to helplessly lose herself in those deep brown orbs and takes a breath before continuing.

"Your eyes say you don't believe me. Your eyes say you think you're not good enough. You're wrong. You're good enough. You're more than good enough for me. Mike, you're perfect. I mean that. There's a reason I yearned for you for three hundred and fifty three days."

Yearned. That had been her word of the day on Day 89, when the pain of watching Mike call her with tears streaming down his face made her chest feel like it was going to explode and she wanted to touch him more than anything she had ever wanted before. It had hurt, it had hurt so badly. Hopper took notice of her tear-stained face at breakfast the next morning and did the only thing he could think of doing. He gave her a word so she could understand an emotion she couldn't express.

But those days were over. That thought still hits the both of them daily. And it brings a tidal wave of emotion every time, just like the intense one that crashes over her in this moment, and all they want is each other.

"You're my everything. Mike, I love you," she finishes and they can't help themselves anymore. He presses his lips to hers and her eyes

flutter closed as she responds eagerly, parting her lips ever so slightly to deepen their kiss. His hands grip at her waist and one of her arms is wrapped tightly around his shoulders, her other hand caressing his face. Their lips move against each other's in a perfectly timed rhythm, matching the other's movements in a way that only they can as they kiss one another fiercely.

When they pull away breathlessly, they stay in each other's arms, El soaking in the sight of the boy in front of her. He rests his forehead against hers for a moment, before she decides she hasn't had enough and swoops in for another kiss. Just as her mouth is about to touch his, he lifts up his hand, and runs his thumb along her lower lip. They're so close that she can feel his breath against her lips as he tenderly whispers, "Merry Christmas, El."

She giggles, pure delight flowing out of her and she wraps both arms around his shoulders. Just before he pulls her in for a long, passionate kiss that will make her feel warm all the way from her head down to her toes, she whispers her response.

"Merry Christmas, Mike."

A/N: Merry Christmas everyone! See you in 2018!

15. Just an update

Hi guys.

I'm so sorry for those of you who were expecting an update. I know it's been forever, but I was holding off because I was writing something really amazing, but it was really long and it wasn't quite done yet.

And I, being the stupid person I am, just deleted the file on accident.

It's gone. It was my longest, best one yet and it's all gone and I can't get it back and I really hate myself right now.

I'm gonna start rewriting it, but it's gonna take some time so please be patient. And know that I really was trying to get it done quickly for you guys.

Gosh dang it, technology.

I'm so sad.

16. 15: Connection (Part One)

Mike Wheeler would be lying if he said he felt absolutely nothing from El during the time she was away.

That's one of the things that kept him going for all those days. Besides just simply wanting her to be alive and refusing to give up hope, he would often be hit with an emotion during his nightly calls that wasn't his own.

It was never obvious at first and he sometimes just shrugged it off, blaming his overwhelming grief for it. And it happened the same way every time. He'd be sitting in her fort, gripping the SuperComm in one hand and telling her all about his day, or whatever he felt he needed to tell her, and then suddenly...he could've sworn he wasn't alone. Something in the air would change and it was always accompanied by this weird sensation on his brain. It was faint but strong, tugging on his mind, always like it was trying to lead him somewhere. One night, out of sheer frustration, when it was more persistent than he had ever felt it, he decided to follow it. Blindly, he stood up, throwing on his jacket and, still clutching his SuperComm, made his way over to the basement door. What made him decide he had to leave, he didn't know, only that something was pulling him outside. But as soon as his hand touched the doorknob, the presence in his mind vanished and he was left with a consuming emptiness and an absolute desperation to be with her, tears threatening to spill down his cheeks.

She could always tell when she had accidentally let him feel her. She'd be sitting in the Void, listening to whatever he had to say that day, when he would murmur something that would make her heart constrict painfully in her chest and in that moment, she would want nothing more than to touch him, to let him know she was right there. His name was the only thing on her mind as she stretched her hand out to him, not knowing what she intended to do, but just wanting to be closer to him.

His face would change and his sentence would falter, trailing off as his eyes darted around the room, frantically searching for the source of the feeling she unknowingly gave him. "El?" he would whisper,

raising the SuperComm to his lips.

She could never stay for long after that, no matter how desperately she wanted to. Hopper would be furious if he found out she was somehow alerting Mike to her presence and so, with the image of him looking absolutely miserable burned in her mind, she would yank herself out of the Void and muffle her heart-wrenching sobs in her pillow.

And then.

And then she returned to him. And then she got to be in his arms again and hear him say her name in real life and see his perfect smile spread across his face. But that overwhelming elation lasted less than an hour and before they knew it, they were forced to separate again. It had hurt like heck and after El whispered, "I'm going to come back," in his ear during their final embrace, he reluctantly let her go, holding onto the promise she had given him.

As she drove away in Hopper's car, Mike felt that all too familiar tugging sensation on his mind and it only made things worse, as if someone was coaxing him, begging him to follow her. That feeling would remain there the rest of the night, through the lab, through the tunnels, through the fire, she was thinking of him. But they wouldn't connect the dots and discover just how intertwined their minds were until later that summer, after she came back to him for good...

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El needed him. Right now. He had to find her. Now.

Numbly, he rises from his seat in the theater and makes his way down the aisle. He has absolutely no idea where he's going, but all he knows is it wasn't even an option to keep sitting there, he had to find her, and he had to find her right now.

All had been going well. School had finally let out for the summer and, much to Mike and El's delight, this meant more time to just simply *be* with one another. The first few weeks had been blissfully perfect, but Mike was itching to bring El into town for at least a couple hours, just so she could experience the community she'd been

excluded from all her life. He begged Hopper relentlessly and El quickly joined his case, pleading her dad to let her out after all this time. By some miracle, they finally got him to grudgingly agree and El couldn't have been happier.

Tonight, Mike had kept it simple. A dinner and a movie seemed like the perfect way to introduce her to the normal life she had been missing out on. For the first time in a long time, they had had a real conversation without being interrupted, talking about anything and everything while they laughed at the other's efforts to eat their steaming plates of spaghetti without spilling any on their nice clothes.

Sitting in the movie theater side by side, leaning comfortably against one another, everything had felt perfect. No responsibilities, no secret government conspiracies, no terrifying monsters from another dimension. It was just them enjoying the other's presence and that's all they really needed. This, this was the normal teenage relationship both of them craved and for a few hours, they could maintain that facade effortlessly.

But Mike and El are not two normal teenagers in a normal relationship.

He's following his instinct, heading down the hallway, rounding corners until he finds himself standing in front of the women's bathroom. He hesitates for a second, but the pulling on his brain has gotten stronger and he tentatively pushes the door open.

"El?" He calls, relieved when he finds the restroom is relatively empty, save for the one small sob he hears coming from the opposite side of the room.

That definitely sounds like her.

He steps through the doorway and his eyes immediately land on the small girl curled up underneath the sinks. Her head is hidden behind her knees and her arms are wrapped protectively around her as her shoulders shake with silent sobs. The sight makes his heart break and he rushes to kneel in front of her. "El?" he repeats, placing a hand on her arm, but immediately regrets his decision when she flinches away

and raises her head, afraid he had scared her.

She sure looks scared. Her tear-soaked eyes stare back at him in confusion, her expression showing that she's absolutely terrified. His stomach drops and he watches as the haze of confusion slowly lifts from her face, only to be replaced with her features crumpling. She limply holds out her hands to him, asking for comfort as the sobs come back in a flood. He's more than happy to oblige and crawls under the sinks with her, taking her in his arms and holding her as tightly as possible. She wraps her arms around his waist and presses her face into the crook of his neck, her body shaking and trembling. He rests his cheek against her hair and gently runs his hand up and down her arm as he holds her, murmuring every comforting thing he can think of, hoping her pain will be gone soon, because he absolutely hates seeing her like this.

After a little while, she pulls back enough to wipe at her eyes, leaving one hand clenched around his shirt. "M-Mike," she whispers hoarsely. "I don't want to stay. I'm sorry." Her head falls back against his chest and he wipes away one of her tears with his thumb as he replies, "Okay, that's totally fine, El. We can leave."

He lets her go long enough to climb out from under the sinks, offering her a hand when he gets out so she can do the same. She grips his hand tightly as they quickly make their way out of the theater, onto the street, and out into the night. Her other hand clutches his arm as soon as they're outside and he squeezes her hand gently.

"So," he starts when they're a little ways away. "What happened in there?" She looks down at the ground and sniffles quietly before she whispers, "Flashback." He nods sympathetically and drops a kiss on the side of her head. Usually, he would then ask her if she wanted to talk about it, wanting to help in anyway he could, but over time, he could sense the answer to that question before he even asked it. Not that that's a good thing-he'd really rather she didn't have any pain she needed to relieve by talking about it in the first place. But whether he likes it or not, her past is still haunting her and while he always wishes he could do more, he knows that all she really needs is for him to be strong for her and listen to whatever she wants to tell him.

They walk in silence as El pieces together her thoughts. When she's finally ready to speak, she clings to his arm tighter than she had been, drawing him even closer to her and he holds his breath in anticipation.

"I had to use the bathroom and when I walked in, a-a lady came out from one of the stalls. Sh-she looked like one of the bad men." Mike squeezes her hand as she struggles to continue. Taking her time, she bites her lip and they walk for a little ways more, before she says,

"She had to be with me ev-every time I went to the bathroom. Every. Time." She adds on with a whisper.

Mike feels that all-too familiar cloud of rage stirring inside him like a storm looming over the horizon at her words.

No wonder El had no concept of privacy. No wonder she thought it was okay to take off her clothes in front of people. Did they let her do anything alone? She was a scared little girl for heaven's sakes, how hard was it to let her do something as private as relieving herself alone?

He's having trouble breathing and he's only vaguely aware how tightly he's gripping her hand. He wishes he could change her past or at least erase all her bad memories but he can't and they still cause her pain and it's been over a year and they just won't freaking leave her alone.

Beside him, El pauses and turns to face him. "And she..." She abruptly cuts herself off when her eyes meet his and it's clear that whatever she finds on his face, she doesn't like it.

His breath catches in his throat as she raises her hands to cradle his face. "Mike, calm down. Please," she quietly pleads him. He curses himself for letting his fury slip into his eyes. This isn't what she needs right now. What she needs is for him to be there for her and listen to whatever she needs to tell him. He'll deal with his fury later. With this in mind, he takes a breath to steady himself and holds her gaze as he feels his anger slowly start to disappear.

"I'm sorry, El," he eventually says. "What were you going to tell me?"

Her face changes and she bites her lip, dropping her hands. Her eyes turn downward and after a beat, she opens her mouth to say something, quickly closing it soon after. He waits patiently as she tries again, inhaling and raising her gaze, but once again, her words fail her and her mouth snaps shut.

By now, they're standing at the edge of the woods that holds her home and, sensing that this is going to be a struggle, he takes her by the hand and leads her to a grassy area nearby. He motions for her to sit down underneath a tree and plops down across from her, cradling both her hands in his.

"What is it, El?" he quietly says, urging her to say something. She sighs, her brow creasing and she gives it another shot, but isn't able to get past "That lady..." before she trails off, bowing her head.

It happens over and over again. Her mouth opens, she tries to form the words she desperately wants to say, something stops her, she closes her mouth, looking more and more defeated each time. He rubs his thumb against the back of her hand comfortingly, willing to be as patient as he needs to be for her.

Her level of frustration rises with every sentence that gets stuck in her throat and when her hands begin to shake, tears welling up at the bottom of her eyes, that's when he starts to get worried. "El?"

"Mike, you can't do anything stupid!" she says suddenly, forcefully. "Promise me, promise me you won't get mad and do something stupid!" She's begging, her voice breaking. Her grip on his hands is crushing and he wants to say yes, he wants to make that promise so badly, whatever it takes to get her to open up, but...he can't. He would break it, he would break that promise. He's never been good at controlling his emotions and based off how he reacted earlier, his word would be broken in a heartbeat.

"El, I...I can't promise you that. I can't make a promise I know I'll break. I'm sorry, but I don't want to let you down."

He winces when her face crumples but it hurts even more when she rips her hands out of his with an agonizing sob, curling up into the same ball he found her in in the bathroom.

His first instinct is to move to comfort her and to apologize a million times over, but seeing her sitting here in the moonlight makes him take a moment to examine her. And not just to admire her, but really examine her. And he's shocked at what he finds.

It suddenly becomes strikingly clear that this girl is being weighed down by a secret that won't set her free. The way her shoulders hunch, the way her arms wrap around her like she's trying to hold herself together, the way she retreats so easily back into herself. She's shackled to it, the shadow of her past hovering over her, making her a slave.

He hates it.

El needs to tell someone and she needs to tell someone fast.

"But here's what I can promise, El. I promise that I will listen to everything you want to tell me and I won't interrupt you and I'll try to help you the best I can and I won't judge you-you know that El-I'll never ever judge you." He puts a hand on her arm to finalize his statement, wanting her to know he means every single word he just said.

When she finally raises her head and he sees tears rolling down her cheeks for the second time that night, his chest constricts painfully, but he holds her gaze tenderly. Her lips are trembling, but she manages to whisper one question.

"Why?"

He's taken aback, but he doesn't hesitate for a second, answering instantly,

"Because I love you."

He watches as her features slowly soften and her posture relaxes ever so slightly. Never looking away from his eyes, she uncurls her body, nodding her head, her subtle way of telling him she trusts him. She reaches for his hands and he grasps them tightly as she scoots closer to him so their knees are touching and she takes a few deep breaths to stabilize herself.

"Mike.

That lady?

The bad lady?"

She inhales. She exhales. She holds on tight to his hands.

"She's the one who hit me the most."

His world stops. Something changes in the air around them. The sudden, overwhelming fury is so blinding and disorienting that he loses his breath for a couple seconds. For a moment, he's suspended in his emotions, each of them battling for the spotlight, each of them growing stronger than the other. Until everything becomes rushing back in an instant and he stumbles to his feet, not able to focus on El anymore.

He whirls around to the west, where that horrible lab is standing defiantly, throwing its very existence into his face.

He hates them. Every last one of them. It was sickening enough the things they forced her to do and the attention they deprived her of, but they had dared to hit her. They had dared laid a finger on an innocent, wonderful girl and he's more than furious.

"Those bastards," he mutters under his breath, venom dripping from his words.

He feels like punching every bad man who had ever hurt her in the face until they beg for mercy.

"Those BASTARDS!" he screams, hot, thick tears streaming from his eyes.

"Mike!"

El's hand lands on his shoulder and she spins him around to face her.

He'll realize later that she hadn't broken down sobbing after she told him. She hadn't thrown herself at him, clinging onto him for dear life. Standing there in the moonlight in front of him, she had

looked...strong. She had looked empowered. Sure, a few tears were making their way down her cheeks, but she looked so...free. Because she told someone. Because she told *him*. He, on the other hand, is a complete wreck.

"I'm here," she tells him firmly and he understands everything that's packed in those two words.

She made it out. She's been out for about two years. She's here, she's not there. Those people who caused her pain have now been replaced. The person who they caused pain to had changed. No longer can they hurt her, no longer can they add more scars to her massive collection. Now, she's surrounded by people who love her, who want nothing but the best for her. The bad men are gone. She's started a new life, one he's fortunate enough to be apart of, but no matter how hard both of them try, she just can't shake the terrors they inflicted upon her in that place.

He pulls her into a fierce hug, gathering her tightly in his arms. She reciprocates, wrapping her arms around his waist and he knows she can feel him shaking.

"No one is ever going to hurt you ever again. No one will ever dare lay a finger on you, El," he swears to her, placing his hand on the back of her head, pressing her closer to him.

"You can't promise that," she mumbles, holding on tight to him. "I won't let them," he replies, his voice low and passionate. "I won't let anyone harm you. You didn't deserve any of that and...gosh, I wish I could fix what happened to you."

"I know you do, Mike."

And they leave it at that. They soak in the feeling of being in the other's arms for a while and when he calms down enough for him to breathe properly, they start making their way back to the cabin. Their fingers interlocked tightly together, he knows he's going to have to take some time to process this, but he's so glad she told him. A part of him can't believe she lived with that for more than fourteen years and it makes his heart tear in two all over again. On the other hand, she seems lighter, happier now. Her smile is less forced when

he looks over at her and in this moment, the two of them feel so...comfortable. Another wall has been torn down, leaving them feeling enormously content and loved.

He's reluctant to let her go when they step onto her porch and with a loving kiss on the cheek, she assures him she'll be alright tonight. For the millionth time, he makes sure she knows she can wake him up for anything at any time of the night and that earns him a quick peck on the lips.

As she walks through her front door, she turns around suddenly and asks a question that he'll ponder during the entire bike ride home.

"How did you know I was in the bathroom?"

17. 16: Connection (Part Two)

Mike needed her. Right now. She had to go to him. Now.

She bolts up from her bed as soon as the sensation starts. They're getting better at this and she immediately recognizes the feeling that tells her who needs her and where. Why, she has absolutely no clue, but she wastes no time in throwing on her shoes and her jacket, briskly walking out of her room and going to stand in front of Hopper, who is lazily reading the newspaper on their couch.

"I want to go see Mike," she states plainly. To her dismay, he doesn't even glance up from the paper in front of him. "Yeah, what else is new," he mumbles gruffly, turning the page. Her brow furrows and she concentrates all her energy on the newspaper in his hands, yanking it out of his grasp with one motion of her head.

"I need to go see Mike. Take me to him," she commands, her voice completely serious. Hopper stares at her incredulously, before finally rolling his eyes. "Fine," he tells her, "get in the car." She thanks him profusely and rushes outside, throwing open the car door and plopping herself inside.

Her knee bounces up and down as Hopper drives towards his house, a habit she picked up from Mike. The tugging on her thoughts gets stronger the closer they get and she tries to reach out to his mind to let him know they're coming, but she has no idea if it even works like that.

When they finally arrive, she barely hears Hopper telling her something about calling him when she's done as she climbs out of the car and rushes up to the front door.

It's only when her hand's on the knob and she's turning it that she suddenly realizes what she's doing. She's still new to this whole "social norms" thing, but waltzing straight into a house unannounced doesn't seem like a normal thing to do, even though she's been here plenty of times.

But she's already halfway there and he's trying to pull her to him and

she has nothing to lose, his parents are fond of her, so she turns the knob and steps into his house.

Thankfully, his mom is nowhere in sight, his sisters are who knows where and his dad is passed out in front of the TV. She sneaks past him easily and dashes up the stairs to her knight in shining armor.

She raps her knuckles lightly on his door when she gets there and her heart freezes when there's no response, but the desperate sensation becomes even stronger. And that's what makes her open his door and enter his room. "Mike?"

Her eyes immediately land on his curled form laying on his bed, facing the wall. For a split second, she thinks maybe he's asleep and is calling out for her in a dream, but then he quietly snuffles and shifts slightly, still not turning around. "Mike?" she tries again. He says nothing.

If she wasn't worried yet, she definitely was now. This wasn't normal for him and before she can even think about it, she reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder. When he shrugs it off, a pang of hurt flashes through her and she's about to say his name once more, when he finally speaks.

"Why are you here?"

He's crying, that much she can tell. His voice sounds coated in tears and the way his body shakes every so often is unfortunately familiar to her. She sits down on the bed behind him, answering firmly, "Because your mind..." She pauses there, not having the words yet to describe...whatever was going on between their minds. "Because you're hurt and I want to help you," she finally says.

He sighs, flopping over on his back and her heart clenches when she sees his face. She's seen him cry before, but every time, the tear tracks running down his cheeks, his bloodshot eyes and his miserable expression makes her realize she would do anything to take away his pain.

"It's just...I shouldn't pull you all the way out here for this!" he exclaims, throwing up his hands and she resists the urge to take them

in hers. Instead, she cocks her head and he takes that as a sign to elaborate. "I mean, my problems are nothing compared to yours. You're strong enough to deal with trauma and flashbacks and I can't even handle finals week!"

"Mike," she says sternly, giving him a pointed look. It is not just finals week that he's upset about and she knows it. This entire week has just sucked and she's surprised he even made it this far. He knows that she knows that and when his eyes meet hers, she doesn't miss the longing and desperation that flickers across his face.

"Turn back around." "What?" "Turn back around."

He shoots her a puzzled look but does as she says anyway, rolling back over onto his side to face the wall. She lays down behind him to mimic his position and when she presses her body up against his, he tenses for a fraction of a second, then relaxes back into her. Snaking an arm tightly around his waist to hold him against her, she gently kisses the back of his neck before asking "What happened?" He sighs, running his fingers up and down her wrist, before whispering "My parents got into a fight."

She nods her head against his shoulder as she feels her heart break. He's already been through so much this week and he doesn't deserve to have this on top of everything else.

Finals week wasn't the only thing pushing him under, but it certainly wasn't helping. He had been up late studying and finishing assignments for the past three nights, the stress of his upcoming tests eating away at his mind. Every time she talked to him, he would tell her about some new project his teachers were assigning, the list growing longer and longer each time. Mike was a fantastic student, but the standards he put on himself and the workload teachers were piling on was getting to be too much.

On top of that, the party had been struggling these days. Lucas had been trying to get Will to let him copy his answers on some math worksheet for forever and while Will would politely decline each time, he would turn right around and complain about it to Mike whenever they were alone. Eventually, Max found out about the whole thing and now her and Lucas were barely speaking. "These last

weeks of the semester are when we need each other the most and now we almost never hang out together as a group," Mike had told her one night, laying in her blanket fort, trusting that she was listening. And she was. Every time.

Last night, he had a nightmare. He had been walking home in the dark, when his brain suddenly told him that a Demogorgon was silently stalking him, wanting to brutally devour to him and his family. He saw it in the trees, in the corner of his vision, in the shadows and he had woken up in a panic, convinced a monster was at his door, coming for him and those he loved. So now, sleep deprivation and that fear had been contributing to his emotions.

In addition to that, a couple days ago, they had been cuddling in his basement, when, out of the blue, he asked her why she didn't like it when Hopper smoked. Since her confession over the summer, she had come to realize that admitting what had happened to her in the first twelve years of her life out loud helped relieve some of the pain, even if he was the only one she trusted enough to share those details with. She knew he didn't want to hear it, but she reluctantly admitted to him that there had been more than one instance where a bad man had put a cigarette out on her arm without remorse. Whether they did it to punish her or just for fun, she could never tell. He had stayed strong for her as she sobbed into him that afternoon, but she had a feeling the tears he had swallowed then were coming back in a flood now.

And now his parents' fight must have been the final thing that pushed him over the edge. He absolutely hated it when his parents fought, hated hearing their screams and threats. Whenever it happened, he either called her up just to hear her voice over their angry shouts or just curled up in his room, trying to drown the world out. Which is what happened today. Except, his miserable week made everything a thousand times worse.

Her problems are piling in comparison to his right now. Whether he believes it or not, he deserves to be comforted, he deserves to be held.

She tightens her arm around his waist and slips her other arm underneath his head, down the front of his body, gripping her other

wrist tightly to secure him in a hold that makes him feel safe and cared for. He eventually does break down sobbing in her arms and she lets him, humming soothingly in his ear and softly kissing his neck from time to time.

She lays there, spooning him like that for a while, until he finally is ready to flip back around and she listens patiently as he verbally sorts out his emotions, telling her anything and everything he needs to. His tone will become lighter and lighter and it's almost as if she can visibly see the burdens being lifted off of him. Eventually, he'll crack a joke with a smile and the mood shifts into a more relaxed one.

Still not ready to be separated yet, they find themselves sitting side by side against his headboard, his head resting on her shoulder and their hands laced together, resting on their legs between them. They're swapping stories, reminiscing about all the stupid things they had done with their friends and somehow, the conversation drifts into the mysterious bond between their minds. Today marks the sixth time this has happened and Mike, ever the scientist, is going through everything they know.

"Okay, so this started...um...before..." and she squeezes his hand, knowing he's referring to those three-hundred and fifty-three days. It still hurts too much to talk about and it's very rare that it comes up in conversation, at least not explicitly.

She's aware she could somehow touch his mind before they were reunited, but, now that she knows what it feels like to be on the receiving end of it...

"Mike, did I ever...lead you anywhere? I mean, back then." His brow furrows as he thinks, something she absolutely loves. Suddenly, his face lights up with realization and he says, "Yeah, it was like a quieter version of what happens now. I always felt like I should be going somewhere, but it-you would always disappear if I tried to follow it."

"So if you had followed it, it would've led you to me?" "Right." He takes a moment before he asks, "Do you know how you did it?" She shakes her head. "I just really, really wanted you to be with me." "And I felt that way, too," he replies, snuggling into her side. "Almost

every night." They fall back into silence and she can practically hear the gears churning in his head. She ponders this as well...she recognized that her powers bridged the gap between them somehow, but why he was randomly able to call to her too was still a mystery.

"Okay, I started being able to do it after that night at the theater," he starts. "And that was the first time I had felt you since you...since you came back. But why was it different from before?" "All I knew was I needed you to come find me," she says, thinking out loud, which wasn't a new occurrence, so why had that time been different? She had been sitting on the tile floor, longing for him one moment and then all of a sudden...

Oh.

The pieces fall into place.

All of a sudden, he had been there.

"Mike!" She bolts up suddenly and he sits up with her, cocking his head to one side. "What?"

"You found me!" she tells him, emphasizing every word. His brow furrows in confusion and she took that as a sign to continue. "You followed it. And it led you to me!" Finally, it clicks for him and he nearly bounces with excitement. "I came to you. I came to you and fulfilled what your mind wanted! I never followed you when you reached out before, but then I found you that night! " She nods her head vigorously with a grin. "And somehow..." "And somehow that gave me the ability to contact you too!"

They stare at each other, awe overtaking their features, happy that they finally figured something out. Falling back against the headboard, they naturally find themselves resting against one another as they take a moment to digest everything. The sheer absurdity of it all makes her chuckle. She's not really sure there's any science behind what happened to them, but she decides to ask anyway. "So, how..."

"I have no idea."

18. Favorites (Plus Author's Note)

A/N: Hey guys!

So! Because I've been busy with a show for the past three weeks and I'm flying to Australia tomorrow morning for Spring Break (:D), Part Three of the Connection series is just a little over halfway done. I'm so sorry for the wait, but I should have plenty of time on the plane to finish it, so hopefully it'll be completed by the time I get back! In the meantime, enjoy...whatever this is. You know those get-to-know-you worksheets teachers always hand out on the first day of school? Yeah, I've always wondered how my two favorite people would fill those out...

Name: Mike Wheeler

Date: 8/29/86

Period: 3

Favorite Color: El's chocolate brown hair

Favorite Shape: El's round, soft eyes

Favorite Movie: Star Wars (Although El's prettier than Princess Leia)

Favorite Food: I guess I have to say Eggos, especially since her lips are sweet with syrup after she eats them.

Favorite Sound: El's laugh

Favorite Smell: The woods near El's cabin

Favorite Song: Can't Help Falling in Love With You

Favorite Item of Clothing: My watch, but I like it better when El wears it

Favorite TV Show: Whatever El's into

Favorite Holiday: Christmas. El loves Christmas

Favorite Vacation: Flying down to Colorado to visit my grandparents,

because El was thrilled to visit the mountains. And I got to hold her hand the whole plane ride there.

Favorite Childhood Memory: November 7th, 1983, when I first met her

Favorite School Subject: Science, especially when I get to teach it to El

Favorite Character Trait: Kindness. Her unbelievable kindness.

Favorite Person: El (Sorry Dustin, Lucas and Will)

Name: Jane Hopper

Date: 8/29/86

Period: 3

Favorite Color: The blue on Mike's walls

Favorite Shape: Mike's fingers, because they fit perfectly in mine

Favorite Movie: Ghostbusters (Mike still has his Venkman costume)

Favorite Food: Eggos. Especially if Mike makes them

Favorite Sound: Mike's voice after a nightmare

Favorite Smell: Mike's shampoo

Favorite Song: Every Breath You Take

Favorite Item of Clothing: Mike's fuzzy green sweater, the one he accidentally left at my house once

Favorite TV Show: Whatever Mike's into

Favorite Holiday: His birthday

Favorite Vacation: Taking a road trip to Indianapolis, mostly because I got to fall asleep on Mike.

Favorite Childhood Memory: ...

Favorite School Subject: English, because Mike helps me read and write

Favorite Character Trait: His passion. He'll fight for the ones he loves and do anything to keep them safe.

Favorite Person: Michael Wheeler (Of course)

"Okay class, now turn to a partner and share out what you wrote!" Their teacher chirps from the front of the room.

El turns to Mike and their eyes lock instantly, enjoying the way his face turns bright red and glances down at the paper in front of him. She has her own butterflies swirling in her stomach, but now she's curious to see if he did the same thing. "Do you want to read yours first?" she asks quietly, the same blush creeping onto her cheeks. The only time he loses confidence around her is when he's nervous, bouncing his knee up and down and avoiding her gaze, which is exactly what he's doing now. "Well...um...if...if *you* want to read it...just...here," he stutters through his words, before putting his paper on her desk quickly and shrinking back into his seat like she was about to scold him. She curiously picks it up and her heart flips the second she scans the first line. Grinning, she never takes her eyes away from his paper and silently hands him hers.

Without the other's knowledge, they both kept the papers they had exchanged that day, holding them close to their hearts and it never failed to boost their spirits when life was spiraling downwards.

Needless to say, that also was the same day the Hawkins High AV Room became the designated space where they went to make out.

19. 17: Connection (Part Three)

Try as they might, they could never send any emotion other than a longing for one another across their bond. Not that they minded—they both were incredibly grateful they had the ability they did, but when they were apart, it was second nature to worry that the other wasn't okay.

With school starting back up again after winter break, it was agreed that El would spend one more semester studying at home in preparation to join her friends at the high school. The idea of being cooped for another five months wasn't thrilling to her, but the party, Mike especially, came out to visit her whenever they had the chance, keeping her loneliness to a minimum. But they too had a responsibility to school and as the link between them grew stronger, it wasn't rare that she would be dutifully sitting at their kitchen table completing her studies and there would be a faint tugging on her thoughts, indicating that Mike was sitting in a classroom, bored out of his mind, wishing that she was there with him. She found it absolutely adorable.

Eventually, it had been a year since Dr. Owens had first given her a limit on how much she could go outside and while she hadn't been completely isolated during that time, she finally got the green light to go wherever she wanted to in town. Of course, the first thing she asked when Hopper told her the news was if this meant she could see Mike more.

Per her request, it was arranged that she could meet the party after school if she finished her own schoolwork for the day. She would hang out with them while they did their homework and then joined them in whatever they felt like doing that day, whether it was a campaign, studying for a huge test or running around in the woods, she just loved spending time with them.

But occasionally, Mike would convince the rest of their friends to just let the two of them have an afternoon together, because they never really could get enough of being around one another. And today was one of those days.

El has decided that the school bell ringing might just be one of her favorite sounds in the world. She stands outside of Hawkins High, counting down the minutes on her watch and when the numbers finally read Two-Four-Five, the familiar tolling sounds across the empty parking lot and her heart leaps for joy. Not even a second later, a flood of kids who have been cooped up all day come rushing through the doors, enjoying their first taste of freedom in seven hours. She uses the bike rack as support as she stands on her tiptoes, craning her neck to find that gorgeous, inky black head of hair she's been waiting all day to see.

He really isn't that hard to spot once he comes out of the building, as he's one of the tallest freshmen in his class. She watches as he breaks off from the crowd and jogs toward her with a grin on his face that matches her own. Dropping his backpack on the ground, he wraps his arms around her when he reaches her and her arms go around his chest. Sighing, she happily rests her head on his shoulder as the rest of the world fades away.

"I missed you," she murmurs in his ear, wanting to be the first one to say it today. "I missed you, too," he replies, pulling back so he can look at her and he squeezes her shoulders. "How was your day?" she asks as they untangle themselves and he launches into a monologue about the lab they had in Biology that day. She smiles contently, giggling in the right places and asking as many questions as she could. For education, of course, and definitely not just to hear him explain something to her.

She's so blissfully wrapped up in this moment that she's completely caught off guard when it happens.

One minute, she's listening intently to Mike's words and the next, they're muffled as she gets the intense feeling that someone's watching her. Someone bad.

She can't explain it, but she just knew. Something in the air shifted and her gut twisted unpleasantly, an unexplainable dread that something was about to happen rushing into her veins.

"Mike," she whispers, putting a hand on his shoulder. "What?" She shushes him as her eyes begin to scan their surroundings. The weird

part is, everything looks completely normal. A group of lanky boys is shooting hoops on the cement court, a teacher is smoking in his car, two girls chatter mindlessly as they walk along the sidewalk, nothing is out of place from the typical after-school scene you would expect.

"El?" Mike says again and she rubs her thumb against his shoulder, starting to hope that this is just a false alarm and her instincts are playing tricks on her. She's this close to giving up her search and shrugging it off when her gaze lands on a vehicle parked at the far end of the lot that makes her audibly gasp as a stab of fear pierces her gut.

No. Not today.

She had a feeling they'd be coming. She had a feeling they'd hunt her down. But she really didn't think it'd be so soon. And she really, really didn't want it to happen ever.

Her heart rate spikes, but she can only watch in terror as the door of the beige van opens and Dottie steps out, giving her a sickeningly innocent wave.

"Run," she commands breathlessly, grabbing Mike's arm and ignoring the confused look on his face. Together, they sprint away from his bike, down the sidewalk and she leads them back behind the brick wall of the school.

"El, what is going on?" "Do you remember when I found my sister?" "What?" "My sister. Kali? Remember?" Mike had been the first person she had told about her adventure to Chicago and he knew more about it than anyone else. "Yeah, I remember, what about her?"

"She's here. Kali and her gang are here." "Here?" "Here. Right now, I saw their van." "What do they want?" "I don't know!"

He falls against the cool brick wall, running a hand through his hair as he processes this. "I won't let them take you," he says suddenly. "You can't go with them." "Mike, I won't leave you, I never will again. But we need to go, now. I just don't know where..."

"Jane?"

Their conversation halts suddenly and they whirl around at the voice, their hands immediately seeking out the other's.

Kali stands before them.

El doesn't know what to think. She didn't think her reaction to seeing her sister again would be so strong. On one hand, a sour taste rises in her mouth and she feels a mixture of fear and anger bubble in her as she remembers what this person believes in and what she tried to make her do. But, to be fair, she had given her a home for however brief it was and the sisterly love Kali had offered was a warmth she had missed.

However, Mike knew exactly how he felt about this person. "What do you want?" he growls forcefully, taking a step to stand in front of El. "I just want to see my sister," Kali replies, holding out her arms. "Is that too much to ask?" He eyes her skeptically and El sighs, squeezing his hand. She escaped Kali's clutches once and she has full confidence that she can do it again. There's no harm in at least just seeing why her sister is here. "I'll be back," she whispers to Mike and cautiously lets go of his hand to step towards Kali.

Wordlessly, she walks straight into Kali's arms and embraces her tightly. "I missed you, Jane," she hears her whisper in her ear and before she can even think about her words, she replies, "I missed you, too." She knew in the back of her mind she was here for a reason that she wasn't going to like, but for now, she soaks in their embrace, knowing they didn't have long. Her long hair tickles her face when a breeze blows through and she smiles when she realized her sister hadn't changed a bit. A waterfall of purple still cascades down her black hair, her style hasn't strayed from the grungy, rock band vibe she held and she holds her fiercely, just like before.

Reluctantly, El steps back and shoves her hands into her pockets, asking a question she doesn't want the answer to. "Why are you here?" she says, not quite meeting her sister's eyes.

"I found someone," she starts with a sly grin on her face and El's gut twists. "No," she says firmly. "No, I won't help you again." She almost turns around to walk back to Mike, when Kali's hand shoots out and catches her by the arm. "Jane, listen to me.

I found the man who gave you this."

She pushes up her sleeve, exposing the 011 tattoo inked on the inside of her wrist and El is suddenly consumed by the memories of the man who had branded her without a second thought.

She had been about seven when it happened. She remembers Papa guiding her to a room she had never seen before and the thing she'll never forget about that man is his eyes. His beady little eyes held no compassion and never once did he regard her as an actual human. He peered at her over huge, wire-rimmed glasses, his shaggy, blonde hair falling around his face as his gaze landed on her left wrist, starting up the machine sitting next to him wordlessly. Papa plopped her down in a chair next to the man and it's then that she noticed he reeked of cigarette smoke and body odor.

When he pulled out the needle, her first instinct was to run, but Papa held her firmly in the chair, whispering words that were supposed to be comforting, but only heightened her anxiety more. The man's rough hands slammed her wrist down on the table and pinned her to the cold surface, before he brought the needle down on her skin, and then pain, pain, pain...

"Don't forget, he hurt me too, Jane." Kali's voice breaks her out of her flashback and she grabs onto her wrist, steadying herself as she gasps for breath. "He's the only one of them who left us with a physical mark. He's the reason why you have to wear your boyfriend's watch just to cover up your scar. He's the reason why you started with a number for a name. He personally reduced us to nothing but branded cattle."

El's gaze snaps up to meet Kali's and she loses control of her emotions.

"What do you want to do with him?" She asks, her voice dark. Her tattoo is one of the only things left tying her to her past and her anger against it, as well as its creator, is swimming to the surface. Kali smirks. "I was hoping you'd ask that," she says. "He needs to feel the pain we felt." "Mark him too?" El asks with a gasp. She'll feel ashamed later, but that thought sounds...delicious. "Axel has some connections," she tells her smugly. "He'll get what he deserves. I just

figured you want to be around to see it, maybe even give us a hand."

It's so tempting. The scar he had given her without remorse cut her deeply and the chance to make it right almost sounded too good to be true.

A small voice on the back of her head comes to life. 'Would it actually make things right?' it says and she bows her head as she contemplates this. Temporarily, the revenge would be so satisfying, but afterwards? 'Does it matter what comes afterwards?' the anger in her whispers and she wants to say no and follow Kali and her gang to wherever they're going...but...

Her mind flashes to Ray, a man who was just trying to do his job. He was a monster, but his humanity had held her back from ending his life. Was it possible the man who had tattooed her was also just trying to provide for his family?

"Jane?"

"No. I...I can't."

"Sure you can. It would take less than a day, we'd have you back by tomorrow morning. We'd make sure your friends weren't suspicious and you'd finally get what you want."

El almost scoffs as she comes to a conclusion. "No. This is what you want. I want to stay here."

Her mind was made up. She didn't want any part in Kali's plan. She would gain nothing but regret from it and besides, her wounds had already been healed enough for her to be content. In one last attempt, her sister grabs her hand and she resists the urge to yank it away. "Jane, you'd be free." El's answer is immediate. "No. You're wrong. Mike already set me free," she declares with a smile and she looks back triumphantly at the freckled boy standing behind her.

Or...who was previously standing behind her.

And is currently nowhere in sight.

Her scream is instantaneous. "Mike?! MIKE?" She's met with a

horrible silence and her vision swims as she whirls around to face her sister. The corners of her lips curling up into a smirk confirm her suspicions and her stomach drops dangerously. "What have you done to him?! Where is Mike?!" she yells, swatting Kali's hand away.

"He makes you weak, Jane. That boy is a distraction," she tells her smugly and El's jaw drops. "You're wrong. You're wrong! Where is he?" she demands, the panic taking over her body. "Kali, please, I need him!" Her sister scoffs. "He's just a boy, Jane. A boy that's getting in the way of you correcting your past. You don't need him, not anymore. You could do so many more things without him as a distraction and I could show you, teach you those things. This is your last chance, Jane." "NO!" she screams, tears welling up at the bottom of her eyes at her words. She needed Mike, it was as simple as that and if her sister couldn't see that, fine. She could live with that. She could live with the entire world not seeing that as long as he's by her side. Which he's not, at least not right now. How had she been so stupid as to turn her back to him?

She stares at Kali through narrowed eyes, her gaze shooting daggers at her sister and she stares right back, proud and defiant. There's a hint of sadness under her hard features, but El pays no attention to it, all sympathy for her gone the second she took Mike.

"Where. Is. He," she growls, taking a step towards her. She sighs. "You know, I really thought you would come around, Jane. It was so good to see you again, my sister." And with that, she spins on her heels and starts heading back towards her van. But there was no way in heck she was going to get away that easily.

Before El can comprehend what she's doing, she's sprinting after her sister and when she's close enough, she plants her feet and focuses on Kali, easily freezing her in place with her powers. She tries to be delicate, but her anger makes that difficult as she pins her sister against the brick wall of the school, her feet hovering a few inches off the ground.

"I said, where is MIKE?" she yells, getting as close to Kali as she dares, her arm extended to keep her in place. The evil grin that spreads across her face makes her feel sick to her stomach but she stands her ground. She had done something to him, she just knows it,

and she's determined not to let her go until she gives him back.

"Maybe that boy isn't completely worthless, after all," Kali starts with a smirk and El blinks, not sure she even heard her right. "This is the kind of anger you need to take down the bad men and if he's the key to unlock your powers, maybe your beloved Mike isn't a distraction after all. Can't you feel it Jane? You can't control this emotion, this is what you need to channel to avenge your past! Don't take it out on me, take it out on them!"

With a gasp, El's control over her sister breaks as her brain screams at her to realize what she's doing. She barely registers Kali sprinting away from her the second her powers release, as she struggles for air.

She hadn't used her powers out of anger in over a year. Her days of hurting people were over...and now? The only justification she has is Kali's sickening smirk when she begged to know where Mike was.

Mike.

Screw it, she'll think about almost hurting her sister and being tempted to join her later, her boy is still missing. She'll regret her actions at a later time when she has someone to help her process. For now, she drops to her knees and rips her jacket off, checking to make sure there's no one around. Hastily, she ties the fabric around her eyes, letting the sound of birds chirping and the breeze whispering help her fade into the Void.

The first thing she notices when she opens her eyes is something has changed since the last time she's been here. She hasn't had to use this empty plane in over six months and it's hard to miss the fog that's dancing in the corner of her vision.

Her thoughts momentarily off of Mike, she glances up and the cloud follows her movements as it hovers just above her head, shifting slightly with her curiosity. Experimenting with it, she tilts her head side to side and it stays with her, moving left then right. Finally, she reaches her hand up and the second her fingers penetrate the fog, the slightest pressure presses into the back of her brain and she retreats in surprise. Without even meaning to, 'left' passes as a thought through her mind and the cloud darts to the left. 'Right,' she thinks

and watches with a grin on her face when it shoots to the right.

So this must be why she was able to reach out to Mike's mind! Her theory is proven true the second Mike's name is whispered through her thoughts. The cloud flies in all directions around her, searching for him in the darkness and when it comes zipping back, Mike appears out of nowhere, laying on the ground before her.

"Mike!" she cries involuntarily, horrified to see that he had been tied up by Kali's gang and was dumped who knows where, his hands and feet bound together, his mouth gagged to prevent him from calling out.

And there's something else. He has a cloud too. For the moment, he's unconscious, rendering it completely still, hovering around his head. The second her heart begins to ache for him, her fog shoots out again, brushing against the very edge of his conscious.

As soon as she makes contact, he jolts awake, his eyes flying open and his body jerks immediately against his restraints. His cloud comes to life, darting this way and that, his distress making it go crazy. When his thoughts land on her, the fog shoots out to her and she feels the familiar tugging in the back of her brain when it makes contact.

She watches in fascination as the cloud encircles her body once it touches her mind, pulling her ever so slightly towards him while he himself continues to struggle on the ground. If she pulls out now, she could find him no problem, using his mind as a guide, but he looks so distraught and helpless that she decides to try something first.

She kneels in the thin film of water beside him and directs her own hazy fog towards his, ever so slowly pushing it closer until the edges meet and fuse together. The second they connect, she's hit with an overwhelming panic and confusion that's not her own and it almost knocks her over. But she doesn't miss the way his body calms down and she fights through his chaotic emotions to push as much peace and reassurance into his thoughts as she can. Slowly, she gets him to relax and as soon as she sees he's okay, she yanks herself out of the Void and pulls the jacket off over her eyes. The daylight is blinding, but she knows exactly where she needs to go.

Her heart pounds as she races across the field and crosses into the woods behind the school. It's tempting to close her eyes and just let his mind guide her through everything, but she really doesn't want to run straight into a tree, so she weaves in and out of them, adjusting her course every so often when the tugging gets stronger.

Finally, finally, she senses he's close and her eyes land on a black mop of hair sticking out from the side of a tree in the distance, her stomach dropping as she races towards him. "Mike!" she cries and he lifts his head as soon as she drops to her knees beside him. Apologies start tumbling out of her the second she starts to untie his hands, tugging at the knots, repeating, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry Mike, I'm sorry I let them get you, I shouldn't have trusted her, I'm sorry," over and over again, until finally he's free. He rips off his gag as soon as he can use his hands and her name is the first word out of his mouth. Her string of apologies stops abruptly when he cradles her face in his hands, tracing her cheekbones with his thumbs. "Hey, it's okay, you don't have to be sorry. You couldn't have known what she was going to do, okay? I'm okay, you're okay, El, everything's okay," he tells her gently, lowering his forehead to rest against hers. Her bottom lip quivers as she bites it, knowing that isn't all she has to be sorry for.

"But, Mike..." she starts in a strangled whisper. "I almost...went with her. I almost said yes. I'm so sorry." She doesn't even need to open her eyes to know his face has gone dark and his fingers tighten their hold ever so slightly. "No..." he finally whispers, his voice fearful. "No, you can't leave me." "I know, I know Mike, I didn't want to leave you either, so I didn't go with her. I'm here," she tenderly reassures him, pulling back to look at him. His eyes are cloudy with disbelief as he mumbles, "Please, please don't let me go." "Never, Mike. Never, do you understand?"

Breathing shallowly, he nods eventually and puts his arms around her to pull her to his chest. She curls up in his lap as he holds her close, both of them fighting off tears as he cradles her on the forest floor, reassuring one another every so often that they were both together and fully intended to stay that way, forever.

"El?" he mumbles after a while. "Mm-hm?" "I...I felt you. I could feel you, stronger than I could before. Before you came and found me, I could've sworn you were in my mind, messing with my emotions. It

wasn't bad! But...what was that?"

She smiles slightly, pushing her forehead against the crook of his neck. "I went to find you in the Void," she begins to explain, "and I could...see our minds. They looked like clouds and when I made mine touch yours..." she trails off, glancing up at him. He's looking at her curiously, absentmindedly running his fingers through her hair. "Could you feel my emotions too?" he questions and she nods. "You were confused...and scared," she states plainly, remembering how suddenly his panic had flooded her thoughts. "Mike, I wanted to help you so badly..."

"And you did. I...I wish it could be like that all the time. "Like what?" she asks as she climbs off of him to face him properly, keeping his hands locked in hers. "Like, in that moment, you knew exactly what I was feeling and exactly how to help me. I dunno, I just felt so close to you. It was comforting, you know?"

Yes, she did know. The second their mind...cloud...fog...things had touched, it was like a piece of her that was missing before was filled and she felt complete in a strange way. Even though their emotions combined was extremely chaotic as she tried her best to calm him down, her mind had been at peace, finding immense strength in their bond. In that moment, she could've sworn they were both invincible.

"I could try," she murmurs. "What?" "I want that too. To know your mind, all the time. Then I'd always know how to help you." He grins, skimming his thumbs over the back of her hands. "Gosh, that sounds amazing. You don't know how much I worry about you when we're apart," he tells her and she nods, whispering, "Me too."

"Mike, I'm serious, I could try," she insists. The small smile that graces his face slowly disappears as he realizes she's dead serious. And she is. Screw the consequences, the idea of being that close to him is all she's ever wanted, she realizes. Sure, this decision is sudden and random, but she's never been one to tiptoe around big decisions in life.

"But...what if something goes wrong?" Mike says quietly, worry creasing his brow. "What if..."

He trails off and the expression that appears on his face is one of pure terror and it's heartbreaking. "Mike, what's wrong?" she says forcefully, searching his eyes frantically. The thought that she'd be able to comfort him if their minds were intertwined and she knew what he was feeling inside made it extremely difficult not to rip her jacket off and escape into the Void and figure out how to do it right then and there.

"What if you decide you don't want to be with me anymore? What if..." he chuckles darkly as she's paralyzed with a crushing sadness. "What if you leave me and still have to put up with whatever goes on in my mind?" "Michael Wheeler," she exclaims, her hands flying up to his face. "Don't. You. Dare. Ever think that I'm going to leave you. No, look at me," she says when his mouth opens to retort. "I love you. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. You saved me and keep saving me everyday. You're all I need and all I'm going to need. I'm so sorry for thinking about leaving with Kali. That. Will. Not. Happen. Gosh, I love you, Mike. Please don't forget that."

By the time she's done pouring her heart out, their foreheads have fallen together once again and she's grasping his face tenderly, biting her lip when his single tear graces the top of her thumb.

"Eleven..." His voice is a raw whisper and before either of them knows it, they're kissing, softly, tenderly, wonderfully.

When they part for breath, their hands never leave each other as he murmurs, "Do it. I don't care, I love you more than you can imagine. Just please don't hurt yourself. Please stop if it gets to be too much." She nods her head firmly, before replying, "Get me to stop if it hurts you, okay? I...I don't know if your mind can handle this..." "There's only one way to find out," he says with a small smile.

Oh gosh. She could hurt him. She's instantly ashamed that that thought never occurred to her, that she hadn't even considered his safety. "But...but...what if you..." she starts to stammer, realizing just how many things could go wrong. He could suffer some sort of brain damage, she could take away all his individual thoughts, she could cause him immense physical pain, this could be an absolute disaster. What were they thinking?

"Hey, no more 'What if's?' okay? I'm tired of 'What if's'. I want to go through with this and if you don't because you're afraid I'll get hurt...I dunno, this would just be so amazing and our lives would be so much better. I don't want you to worry about me, I'm more worried about you," he tells her and she sighs. "Okay. No more worrying."

El rises to her knees to take off her jacket off once again and settles herself back down in front of him. "Ready?" "Ready." "I love you." "I love you too."

Slipping into the Void was extremely weird this time. One second, Mike is in front of her, grasping her hands firmly and giving her an encouraging smile in broad daylight and the next, he's in the exact same position, only their surroundings have been stripped away and they're encased by darkness. She watches from an omnipotent point of view as he watches her physical body curiously, having no idea she's standing at his side in the Void.

Their minds are still clearly visible to her and she's so close to him, she accidentally brushes up against his cloud, sending a jolt through her body as well as reminding her why she was here.

Exhaling, she steps in front of him. Admittedly, she has no idea how she's supposed to do this or what the outcome of her actions will be, but in the end, she just goes with what feels right.

'Forward,' she thinks, and her misty mind inches closer to Mike's, dancing and swirling through the air until it makes contact with his. A smile spreads over her face as his curiosity whispers in the back of her thoughts, colorfully tinged with his worry for her. His breath hitches, but he seems to be doing okay, although she begins to send constant reassuring messages across their bond, watching his face closely.

She decides to push a little further past just the edge and the pressure on her brain increases just slightly, his emotions becoming the tiniest bit stronger in her head. Pushing a little harder yields almost the same result as she gives them time to both get used to the sudden intrusion on their minds.

It's only when his mind is almost halfway encompassed by hers that

the sensations start. At first, it's just a fleeting memory, what he had for lunch yesterday. The image of it appears first, followed by the taste of his sandwich, smothered by the sound of their friends laughing. Experiencing it distantly, she can feel his contentment, his comfort in being surrounded by his friends and it makes her smile. Without meaning to, her fog dances forward and she's hit with another, this one displaying the test they had gotten back at the beginning of the week. The sensation of the paper in his hands tingles on hers and she can faintly see the big red "C+" at the top of the page. His shame is sudden and overwhelming as she watches this moment through his eyes, realizing it's beginning to blur because of his tears.

He hadn't told her about that.

Another involuntary lurch forward into his mind and she's starting to get concerned. Distantly, a memory of him playing with Holly is swirling at the edges of her thoughts, but she's more focused on the physical scene before her. Mike's still on his knees, his eyelids shut tightly as his eyes dart underneath them. She can only assume he's receiving a handful of her own memories and is thankful the one right now is making him grin. Turning her attention back to their minds, she makes the observation that at the very center of everything, three white, glowing tendrils have stretched from her cloud to his and vice versa to wrap around their respective counterparts.

Three tendrils. Three memories. And by the looks of it, there's no turning back.

And of course, being the reckless person she is, El decides to go full speed ahead and moves quickly to get almost her entire mind to the halfway point where the memories are fusing.

The intensity of thousands of his emotions and memories transferring to her all at once is beyond overwhelming and she falls to her knees as she feels *everything*. His past joy, frustration, pride, fearfulness, contentment, grief, bravery, boredom, love, hate, it all overflows into her conscious at once as her brain processes what different emotions feel like in Mike's mind. She's on the ground, tears streaming down her face, regretting not going slower as she bites her lip to keep from

crying out. It's too much, too much, and acting on instinct, she tries to rip her mind away from his, only to find that it won't budge.

What's done is done. Their link is becoming permanent whether they like it or not.

She manages to open her eyes for the briefest of seconds to see that her boy has also fallen to the ground, his hands clutching at his head as he receives all her past emotions. His body is trembling in the worst way and she screams his name, begging whatever higher force may be out there to help him survive this. His current state of extreme discomfort and confusion is at the heart of her mind, a constant reminder of what she's doing to him, as well as what life will be like once this is over.

If she can actually convince herself to finish this. A good hundred stragglers are still floating at the edges of their two clouds and for now, she just wants to rest, the raw emotions still flooding all of her senses.

So wait she does. In agony, she rests her cheek against the watery ground of the Void and does everything in her power to focus on the sensations that make her happy. Because despite just how much is flying around in her brain, she can still hear his laughter, she can still see his smile, his love for life. And that's what she holds onto as their world spins out of control.

Finally, finally, it slows to the point where she can lift her head, which feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. Emotions are still being registered, but it's been reduced to a faint hum, allowing her to examine Mike, who also has lifted his head.

His skin is the most pale she's ever seen it, which is saying something and he looks like he's been through hell and back. But, despite all that, he still manages to tell her, "El, I'm okay. If you can hear me, take care of yourself, but you can keep going. You shouldn't worry about me, I promise."

"I love you," she calls out and proceeds to use the last of her strength to force the final tendrils together. This time wasn't nearly as painful as the first, but she still found herself squeezing her eyes shut as the

river of emotions continues.

The last memory that flashes before her fills her with so much joy, the ache from the last hour disappears like *that*. She relishes in it, soaking in every detail there is, because it also is one of her happiest memories.

Their first kiss. She hears his racing heart as he stares into her eyes, feeling his words slip out of his grasp. All sound has faded away, save for his pulse pounding in his ears as he darts forward and their lips meet. Happiness and love explodes inside of him as she remembers happening in her and she knows she's grinning ear to ear as the last of that beloved moment in time fades out.

Then comes the light. A blindingly white light shoots through the Void, knocking her out of it by its sheer power and she's back in her actual body, her mind feeling like it's on fire. She's quickly losing the fight to stay awake as she feels her body crumple, and then she's falling, falling, falling. Her body hits the ground and the last thing she remembers is Mike's exhaustion pounding in the back of her thoughts, along with the sight of a single stream of blood dripping from his nose as he lays unconscious on the ground. Her vision fades to black and their minds rest, for a powerful thing was done today.

Mike and Eleven were Connected.

20. Connection (Finale)

She feels it long before she opens her eyes. Heck, she feels it before she even registers that she's awake. The sensation is so pleasant and soothing that she keeps her eyes shut to soak it in, feeling the corners of her lips twitch up into a soft smile.

This, without a doubt is the best way to wake up, ever. She can't wait until the day where she gets to start all her mornings like this.

"Good morning Mike," she mumbles and is rewarded with a surprised chuckle that comes from somewhere in front of her. She has yet to open her eyes to see him today, choosing to focus on what she can feel from him instead. The back of her mind is tingling, bathed in a warmth that swirls around quietly. Out of all the emotions she can decipher from Mike, this one is definitely a favorite.

Admiration. He had bashfully explained the definition to her during the first few days of their connection, since, of course, it was one of the feelings that came up the most and she got curious as to what was making her feel so loved.

"How long have you been watching me?" she asks teasingly, finally cracking open her eyes and peeking out from under the blankets of her fort just in time to watch his cheeks go red. But his adoration is stays strong as he responds, "Not too long," with a smile. "I came to tell you that we're leaving for the lake in about five minutes. And...and I didn't have the heart to wake you up. You just looked so...peaceful, you know?"

She's glowing inside as she pulls herself into a sitting position, rubbing at her eyes sleepily. "Can you wake me up like that every morning?" she says quietly and she's hit with another wave of admiration, causing her to grin. "Yeah, someday, that'll happen, I'll make sure of it," he responds almost in a whisper, but it's all she needs as he stretches out a hand to her and helps her crawl out of her fort.

It takes her a second to glance around the basement in confusion. "Where's everyone else?" she asks, cocking her head to the side as he

locks their fingers together. When she had fallen asleep the night before, the rest of the party members had been stretched out in sleeping bags on the basement floor, eagerly anticipating the events of the next morning as they closed their eyes. They were currently nowhere in sight and the place was now spotless, making it nearly impossible to tell that six rowdy teenagers had held a sleepover the night before.

"Most of them are already in their cars," he responds and her eyes go wide. "I'm not ready, though!" she exclaims, starting to panic at the thought of holding all her friends up. "Are they all waiting for me?" "No, no, no, you're fine, we all agreed you could use a few extra minutes of sleep," he reassures her quickly, skimming his thumb over her skin. "Go ahead and get dressed, I've already packed you breakfast. You brought a lot of layers, right? It's gonna be really cold today." She nods, finding the way he looks after her adorable. "Okay," he breathes. "I'll wait for you upstairs," and with that, he squeezes her hand before releasing it, turning to jog up the stairs. She watches him go happily, before turning to the duffel bag Hopper had packed for her.

After the blizzard that shut down schools and snowed in all of Hawkins last week, the Party had been begging their parents to take them up to the lake outside of town that was bound to be frozen over this time of year. It was one of the best places to go ice skating and, after being cooped up in their houses for a couple days, they were itching to go out and enjoy the weather together.

Had El ever been ice skating? No. Was she insanely excited to try it? Yes.

She pulls on her warmest jacket over her clothes for the day and tugs on her boots as fast as she can, dashing up the stairs to join Mike at the top, carrying her mittens in one hand and her thick, knitted hat in the other. She knows she probably looks like a mess, but he's never been one to judge her. Or...so she thought.

"You look like a marshmallow," he says, probably without realizing and she nudges him playfully. "I'm sure you will too," she retorts, watching his smile turn into a grimace. "Yeah, the coat my mom packed me isn't the most...flattering thing," he admits, shrugging his

shoulders. Checking to make sure no one's watching, she presses a soft kiss to his cheek as she replies, "I don't care."

The blush that spreads across his face lights up her whole world.

It's not until they settle themselves in the car, his mom has very cheerily wished her good morning and they're rolling out of the driveway that she notices his exhaustion. Heavy and dull, it throbs in the back of her mind and she looks at him with alarm. "You're tired," she states blatantly, placing a hand on his arm. His eyebrows knit together as he glances at her. "I mean, I guess, I am a little. It's fine though, I'm okay," he tells her reassuringly.

'A little' wouldn't cause the back of her mind to be nearly pounding.

"Mike, you're really tired," she says again and she finally sees it in his eyes when he looks at her again. A beat passes before she rearranges herself so she can rest her head on his shoulder, snuggling into his side as he sighs. "Rest," she tells him quietly. "We'll be here a while." His cheek lands against her hair and it doesn't take long for his thoughts to slow and his body to relax against hers.

Her mind wanders as she listens to his constant inhales and exhales, eventually landing on how grateful she is they made the decision they did a couple weeks ago. She had been so scared of regret and the potential pain it would cause, but their risk paid off.

Their mental connection had become almost a blessing. It's not like they were bad at reading one another and caring for the other to their full capacity before, but now...now they had a bond that transcended human relationships, though human they both still were. On the outside, it only appeared as if they were more comfortable around each other, if that was even possible. Physical contact had always been common between them, but now, it happened without them even consciously thinking about it, finding it the remedy to whatever mood the other was in. El was happy, Mike would squeeze her hand. Mike was annoyed, El would give him a hug. El was upset, Mike would put an arm around her shoulders and take them somewhere where they could talk about it. Mike was excited, El would rush to his side to see what he was so enthusiastic about, etc. etc. It happened automatically, without them having to look at

each other most of the time and while that crept their friends out, the random glances they'd throw the other seemingly out of nowhere were probably the strangest part.

Between them, the days of masking an emotion were gone. They knew each other inside and out, and while the thought frightened her sometimes, she trusted Mike wholeheartedly, knowing there's no one else she would rather share her deepest, most private feelings with. It was more comforting than anything, since she never had been the best at expressing herself through words. Him, he was the opposite, seemingly too good at articulating exactly how he felt. So being able to rely on each other for help without needing to verbalize anything had been a tremendous change.

Really, their connection was perfect in every way. She almost can't believe they ever survived without their mental bond, it's made that much of a difference.

Eventually, her thoughts become sluggish and she willingly lets herself fade away, dozing on Mike's shoulder contently as the tires thrumming on the pavement put her to sleep.

Surprisingly, it's Mike who wakes first. His eyes flutter open to reveal the exact same thing he was looking at when he fell asleep, although the unfamiliar trees outside indicate they're much closer to the lake. Slowly, he becomes aware of the warmth on his shoulder and glances over to see his girl curled up at his side.

How he didn't wake her up *again* when his heart melts and his insides leap is beyond him.

Her hair tickles his cheek in the best possible way when he turns his head to look out the window, observing the passing forest, still white from the previous snow.

Sure, he's still a little wary about taking El out on the lake, even though his family has done this trip hundreds of times. She's never skated before, obviously, and while he was worried she wouldn't like it or she would seriously injure herself if she fell, he had felt her enthusiasm when he first brought up today to her and it was enough to convince him that she'd be fine.

A few more minutes and El's thoughts suddenly whirl back to life as he feels her shift beside him. She's confused, disoriented at first, but then he feels that all give way to curiosity as she leans over to peek out the window. "We're about five minutes away," he says, answering her question before it's asked and she beams up at him. "You excited?" "Very," she replies as he lifts his arm to wrap it around her shoulders and she burrows against him once more.

The rest of the trip is uneventful, each enjoying the warmth of the other as his parents chatter quietly in the front seat, Holly playing with the radio every so often.

Her excitement buzzes in the corners of his mind and when they finally, *finally* come into view of the lake and pull into the parking lot, he's surprised she hasn't burst with anticipation yet. Still keeping close to his side, she cranes her neck, the purest of smiles ghosting her lips as she takes in everything.

When his mom chooses a parking spot, he gets out of the car as quickly as he can, tugging her along with him and once her feet hit the ground, she takes off running toward the icy sheet of a lake without a word. Knowing their friends will be here soon, he opts to stay at the top of the hill and give her this moment alone, although he wanders to the edge of the crest so he can watch her as she races down the path.

When she reaches the very edge of the lake, she stops and he can see her tiny shoulders moving heavily with her exhales as she catches her breath. But he knows she's not even close to thinking about that.

She's in awe. Astounded. Amazed. Astonished.

The second her feet stop moving, the elation that explodes within her and, consequently in him, is so powerful and so consuming that he can't help the tears that prick his eyes.

An outsider would assume she's just being childish, getting worked up over nothing. It's just a frozen body of water.

But Mike knows better. He knows better than anyone. He knows that she's been itching to see the world, he knows she has days where the

confinements of the cabin start to drive her crazy, he knows there's a world out there that she'd been deprived of and she just wants to experience it all, he knows that this is the farthest she's gone from Hawkins in six months.

He knows that this moment means the world to her. To stand out in the open, at the edge of one of nature's wonders that's so often undervalued, to see nothing but shimmering ice for miles, to see something other than the small town she's trapped in, without worrying about being in danger or being discovered.

He knows she deserves to soak in this moment more than anyone. So, nudging up against her thoughts just enough to reassure her that she can take her time and he'll be waiting for her (and that he loves her, but that slipped in on accident), he makes his way back to the lot, smiling when he sees that Max and Lucas have just arrived.

He greets them cheerfully as they pile out of the Sinclair's minivan and it isn't long before a conversation is struck up about skateboarding vs. ice skating and who's most likely to fall on their face first today.

Just as Lucas and Mike are enthusiastically recounting the time that Dustin wasn't watching where he was going and collided with a tree branch, resulting in a minor concussion, the victim of that very story and the one who had been smart enough to call an ambulance that day roll up in the parking lot behind them, spurring another round of hugs and greetings among the party.

Chaos ensues shortly after, as it usually tends to do when they all get together, but they wouldn't have it any other way. Food is unpacked, ice skates are pulled out, more pairs of gloves and hats than can be counted are thrown around as they all prepare for the next few hours, lugging everything they need down to the edge of the lake.

Though her fascination still hasn't dissolved, Mike soon spots the familiar head of creamy brown curls making its way back up the hill and he grabs her pair of skates they had rented along with his as she says hello to all their friends with the biggest smile on her face. He can't help but overhear as she shares with all of them how happy she is to be here and they reciprocate her feelings without a second

thought. A sentimental tone has come over her voice and he chuckles when he glances over his shoulder to see her giving hugs to each and every one of their friends, thanking them profusely not just for letting her join them today, but for just about everything they've done to get her to this point.

He hadn't intended for today to spark this much emotion and nostalgia in her, but being here truly meant more to her than he can ever imagine and he's more than willing to just let all of this happen. Checking to make sure he has everything, he makes his way back over to his friends, where El's embracing Will tightly, and he can see him murmuring something in her ear.

"Man. All I did was show up," Dustin cracks when Mike gets close enough, the hint of surprise unmistakable in his voice. Mike smacks his arm lightly, rolling his eyes with a grin. "She's happy," he says simply, only to be met with Dustin's "Yeah, I can see that."

There's a comfortable silence between the two friends, before the curly-haired one pipes up with, "You gonna be helping her learn to skate today?" "Yeah, of course," Mike replies and Dustin nods shortly. A weird feeling twists in his gut at his friend's reaction, not sure how to interpret his less-than-optimistic response. "Is that okay?" he asks genuinely, even though it's been a good while since anyone in the party had a problem with Mike and El's strong relationship. "Yeah, totally, it's fine," Dustin replies, but he still isn't convinced, despite that smile displaying all of his pearls. "You sure?" "Mike." He turns to look him in the eye. "You're gonna make this day so much more special for her. We understand," he says, placing a hand on his shoulder. A smile tugs at Mike's lips, and he nods in response, turning his attention back to El.

Who, *wow*, is *still* hugging Will. He tries to repress it the second he feels it, the bubble of jealousy that makes his hands clench and his breathing increase, repeating to himself over and over again that she has other friends that she appreciates a lot too. It's no big deal, he's fine, everything's fi-

El lifts her head from Will's shoulder, glancing at him with a smirk and a twinkle in her eye.

Dang it, he let his emotion slip into their bond. Oh well, at least she releases Will and comes to nuzzle her forehead into the crook of his neck, palms flat on the front of his jacket, the best she can do with his hands being full.

He drops a kiss against her curls in response and she gives a small hum of delight. "This is beautiful," she murmurs, finally lifting her head and gesturing towards the scene below them. "I agree," he replies and hands her her skates. "But just wait until you're actually out on the ice, it's awesome!" She grins, taking the skates from him and he joins their hands as she heads back for the lake. Making sure his friends know they're not just abandoning them, Mike turns to glance over his shoulder at the group, smiling when he sees Dustin give them a thumbs up and Lucas nod encouragingly at him.

"Will this be hard?" El's small voice pipes up beside him as they walk down the path. "It's not too bad. It just takes a lot of balance and patience. Remember when Max taught you how to skateboard? It's a little like that, only you move your feet more." He watches her eyes go wide and a mix of uncertainty and fear dances through the back of his mind. "But...but I fell learning how to do that. And it hurt...a lot," she says to him, her eyebrows creasing in alarm. "I know, but that's how you learn how to do these things. But hey, look at me." They pause their route as she turns to eye him warily. "I'm going to be by your side every step of the way, okay? I'm not the best skater, but I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you don't get hurt today. I want you to enjoy this as much as possible, so let me do the worrying, okay? All you have to do is follow my lead and I'll help you through everything. You're gonna be okay," he finishes with a reassuring nod. The little smile that he's grown to love so much twists up the corners of her mouth and he feels her anxiety subside. "Okay," she whispers, squeezing his hand and together, they walk the rest of the way down the path and he leads her over to a small wooden bench by the water's edge.

She gazes out across the ice as he kneels at her feet to help put her skates on and lace them up. He makes the mistake of glancing up at her right as a breeze begins to blow gently through the trees, ruffling her hair and, combined with the entranced look on her face, she looks like a freaking princess.

"Mike, focus," she chastises playfully, still looking out at the lake. "Right, sorry," he mumbles, turning his attention back to her laces, missing the completely love struck smile she gives him when she sees he's not looking.

When he's finished, he hastily pulls on his own skates, tying them up expertly and rises to his feet when he's done, taking a moment to steady himself before extending both hands down to El. He helps her stand up slowly, the ice beneath them making it slightly difficult for him to bear her weight, but he doesn't care. This is about her, not him.

She grips his mitten-covered fingers tightly, staring at her feet as she gets used to only a thin piece of metal supporting her. "Does that feel okay?" he asks after a little bit, once her legs stop shaking and she feels a little more stable. Raising her head ever so slightly to meet his gaze, she nods her head and he offers her a small smile in return. "Okay, I'm gonna let go okay? Just so you can get used to it?" She's been fairly calm up until this point, but the second he mentions her standing on her own, her panic spikes alarmingly, her eyes going wide and she shakes her head firmly, grasping onto him as tightly as she can. "Okay, okay," he chuckles, "We can wait." She settles down a little and glances at her feet, shifting them a little to feel how they glide along the surface underneath her. It takes her a second, but he slowly feels her determination grow in the back of his thoughts. He waits until he can tell she's a little more comfortable before whispering, "I'm gonna stay right in front of you, okay? I'm not going anywhere." She gives a small nod to show she understands and then, ever so slightly, her grip on him loosens. It feels like she's having to force her fingers to pry away from him, but eventually, only her palms rest on his forearms. "Don't leave," she murmurs, her gaze now fixed on his face. "I won't," he tells her and she lets go of him completely.

Her fear is instantaneous, sharp and jagged in his mind as she holds her arms out to help herself balance. But, no matter how terrified she feels, she keeps all her concentration on staying upright for as long as she can. For a few moments, she stays completely still, before she subconsciously shifts her weight and her left foot slips out behind her. She whimpers his name as her arms flail and he catches her the

second he sees her start to struggle.

He says nothing as she clings desperately to him, frozen in the position he caught her in, letting the shock of what just happened dissolve. She's breathing heavily and ever so slightly, he rests his forehead against the top of her hair, in an attempt to drag her back to reality and reassure her that everything's okay.

When she whispers, "One more time," he really isn't that surprised, having felt her shred of confidence spring back up once the cloudiness of her thoughts had cleared. Carefully, he readjusts them back to their previous position, her gripping his forearms and him holding her elbows gently as she made herself stable. She releases him as she's ready, focusing diligently on remaining immobile and this time, she manages to stay up for a few more moments, before she falls back into his arms once more.

Her face buried in his chest, she heaves a sigh of exasperation and he quietly helps her get back up on her feet. The process repeats itself over and over again and each time, her frustration grows, whirling around the back of his mind as her persistence to get this right and her annoyance at how much she's lost her balance clash. But, throughout it all, he makes sure she feels nothing but patience from him and that he's there to catch her when she slips every single time. He feeds her encouragement mentally while supporting her physically, figuring spoken words couldn't really do much in this situation. And it pays off, because the second she gets it, her brilliant smile lights up everything around them. Her triumphant glee dances in the back of his thoughts when as she stands fully upright on the ice, her hands at her sides, her feet steady and solid. Carefully, he backs away from her, keeping close enough that he can help her if need be, but giving her the space to feel independent. She's confident, her body relaxed as she beams up at him and when she successfully goes a while without falling, he skates back over to her, grinning widely.

"El, this is awesome, I'm proud of you!" he says earnestly and he extends his arm to hold so she can relax. "Thank you," she says as she grasps onto his forearm with less urgency this time, her sense of accomplishment radiating from her mind. "Do you want to try moving around a little?" he asks and watches her face closely, seeing

if she still feels comfortable out here and is up for the challenge. He doesn't get a response as her eyes flicker away from his and out to their surroundings, scanning the ice around them as if she had momentarily forgotten where they were, since all her focus had been on not collapsing. With a small, firm nod, she smiles and looks back to him, sliding her hand down to the crook of his elbow. He bends it to give her enough support, before turning so they face in the same direction.

"Okay, how this works is you're gonna pick one foot up a little, slide it forward and diagonally, and then do the same with the other foot, except in the other direction when the other foot can't go any further without you falling." He gestures with his hands as he explains, pantomiming feet sliding over the ice. "It's gonna take a little while, but you'll get into the rhythm of it soon enough. Sound okay?" "Yes," she replies and he turns his attention to his feet. "Okay, copy what my feet do." He slides his left foot out to their left, going slow as she gingerly does the same. "Stop," he whispers gently. "Now the right one, okay?" She stares at their feet and he can tell she's pondering how this is going to work.

She's not as scared as he admittedly thought she would be, but this is unfamiliar territory for her and the fear of falling is buzzing anxiously through the back of his thoughts. It heightens when he feels her shift her weight, unsure of how to make her right foot move.

He knows it's better to show her than to try to explain, so with his left foot planted firmly, he crosses his right foot in front of her left and she follows, gasping when they move forward, causing her to wobble slightly. The other hand flies up to grip his arm and she holds onto him tightly.

"We're just gonna repeat that over and over again, because just sliding your feet like that is really all there is to skating," he explains, covering the hand linked on his elbow with his. "Don't worry, we'll go slow." "Don't let me go," she replies instantly and he shakes his head. "Never."

Over the next few hours, he takes her around in a circle more times than he can count, gently guiding her on how to move her feet and murmuring encouraging things to her as she slowly got used to the

rhythm of skating. Although, honestly, he could do this forever. Watching her cheeks turn pink from the cold, her lips tinged slightly blue, her curls framing her cheeks her face as they skate lazily around the edge of the lake, clinging gently to one another. Their friends join them eventually, and then it's watching them race each other over and over again, failed attempts to do figure skating tricks, spinning until they almost puke, there's no other place they would want to be this afternoon.

By the end of the day, as the activities wind down, El has gotten the hang of being on the ice and he could not be more proud of her. Her feet now move effortlessly in sync with his and while she could probably make it on her own now, her fingers stay wrapped around his arm lovingly, making his skin tingle even through all the layers he's wearing.

Her fear has long since dissolved into contentment and as they drag themselves off the lake, hints of pure, undeniable love have slipped into his mind and he's positive she can feel his in return. Not many words were exchanged as they trudged back up the hill, bid farewell to their friends and collapsed against one another in the car, but the silence was anything but empty. After an entire day of just simply being by each other's side, they felt renewed and complete as if a missing piece of them had now been restored. They find complete comfort in the love sizzling between their thoughts as he runs his fingers through her hair, her head in his lap, their thoughts consumed with nothing but one another.

Maybe that's why it finally happened. Maybe the fact that all they could think about was the other, their emotions strong and sure was enough to finally pull them even closer.

It happened so quickly and felt so natural that he had to do a double take to make sure his brain wasn't messing with him. But, sure enough, out of the middle of nowhere, three quiet, genuine words danced through his thoughts with a voice that certainly didn't belong to him. They left a buzz in their wake, lighting his mind up in ways he didn't know was possible.

"I love you"

It was her whisper, yet her lips never moved, her eyes never fluttered open.

That was it. The last barrier separating them had been shattered and he gasps as he realizes what had become of their connection.

"I love you too", he sends back without opening his mouth and she cracks open an eye to smile at him.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

No one could be closer. Their thoughts now fully entangled with one another, they were untouchable, a pure symbol of unconditional love and devotion.

They were Mike and Eleven, bound together in every sense.

By their emotions.

By their thoughts.

By a promise.

A/N: Hi! Just so you guys know, I'm not planning on continuing to have them be mentally connected in my future oneshots, so when that disappears, don't be confused!

Also, I know it's been way too long since I've updated, I apologize...I'll try to be better about that and I definitely won't make you wait this long again! Thanks everyone for all your support, I love you all!

21. Speech

It hadn't always bothered her. In fact, until only recently, it never failed to put a smile on her face and lift her spirits just a little bit more. For a while, it was something she craved, something she would relish in and would often find herself working just a little bit harder to get it to happen again.

Hopper was really who she first heard it from. One night, after recounting what she had learned from flipping through a few of his old books (during yet another dull day that she was trapped in the cabin), she paused to take a breath and realized with a start that he was just staring at her, his fork hanging limply from his hand, his jaw paused mid-chew as he remained still. Fearing she had done something wrong, she squirmed in her seat and glanced down to avoid his gaze. "Are you mad at me?" she mumbled after a beat as she felt the shame rise up to her cheeks for really no reason at all. "No, no kid, you didn't do anything," he said with a chuckle, breaking out of whatever trance he was in. "I just haven't heard you talk that much before. It was impressive. You're learning, that's good. Really good," he told her before flashing her a smile and returning to his food.

While it wasn't exactly a direct compliment, she still felt something stir inside of her at his words, making her sit up just a little bit straighter as her emotions soared. She was hard wired to seek approval and the genuine way he said it was enough to satisfy her completely.

When she was finally allowed out in the world, the adults that became a part of her life praised her often and she got such a joy out of knowing she had pleased an authority figure. "You've been studying your vocabulary, haven't you?" Joyce would ask her one afternoon when she would make small talk with her, "You speak so fluently now," Aunt Becky would comment when they went to go visit Mama every so often and, her favorite, "That's a pretty big word for you," became a regular phrase from Flo, who was still baffled as to why Hopper randomly showed up with a daughter.

It's only recently that those comments are accompanied by a twist in her gut and it utterly confused her for a while. Compliments are

something she lives for (maybe not as much as Eggos and Mike's kisses, but still), so why they had begun losing their effect is beyond her. She first noticed it when Will had told her how nice it was to hear her talking more a couple weeks back. An icky feeling spread inside her and she was surprised that she had to fight to keep her face from falling. This new reaction came seemingly from out of nowhere and she decides to just let it be for a while, not knowing what else to do. That is, until she finally figures it out and it becomes all she could think about.

She tries to forget it bothers her most of the time, because when she thinks about it, it ends up leading her down a rabbit hole of conclusions that never, ever leave her feeling confident in herself. No one knows about it yet, because she's always been good about bottling up her emotions. So she keeps it inside, even though the more she suppresses it, the more pressure is added to her chest when someone brings it up and she could feel it shaking inside of her. Whether or not it was a rational thing to be hurt by, she had no idea, which is why she has yet to bring it up with anyone, convincing herself that it was stupid and she would be reprimanded for it. But as the days drag on, it will. Not. Go. Away.

Because of it, her everyday mood has started to dwindle and, as much as she tries to stop it, slowly but surely she's shrinking back into herself. It scares her, honestly, but she's at a loss for how to deal with it. It seems defining it only made it worse, gave her something to look out for and it's taking a toll on her. However, the prospect of having dinner at the Wheeler's is more than enough to cheer her up and, sitting at their table, her leg brushing up against Mike's as she feasts on the best casserole she's probably ever had, she feels herself returning back to normal, the knot that had been created in her stomach slowly disappearing.

That is until she answers Mrs. Wheeler's question the best she can and she lets out a little gasp. "Eleanor, your English has improved!" she exclaims before promptly turning her attention somewhere else.

Dang it. El feels her face start to droop and she lowers her head, turning her gaze to her hands, as that gross feeling bubbles up in her chest, claiming back its residence.

A light touch on the back of her hand catches her attention and she glances up to meet Mike's concerned eyes. "I'm fine," she says automatically, cursing herself for not realizing that he would notice something was up. He raises his eyebrows and holds her gaze for a beat while she prays he can't see through the fake smile she plasters on. Finally, the corners of his mouth drop slightly and he intertwines his fingers with hers, keeping his hand in hers the rest of dinner, something she appreciates immensely.

She feels slightly better by the end of the meal and has shoved her emotions back into their place by the time everyone starts cleaning up. Diligently scrubbing off her plate, she hopes she's off the hook...only to have that wish come crumbling down when she feels a familiar hand on her shoulder. He tugs her away out of earshot from his family and lowers his voice. "What's going on with you?" he asks and she just shakes her head after a moment's pause, not knowing what else to do. She can feel him studying her intently, knowing how easily he'll be able to look past her facade. "We'll be back," he suddenly calls over her shoulder and doesn't wait for a response before gently guiding her to the basement. She's reluctant to follow, but she knew this was coming. She'd accepted that she'd have to tell him eventually the second he noticed at dinner.

Once they've made it to the safety of his basement, she can tell he suddenly doesn't know what to do, shifting from one foot to the other uneasily. "Um...do you want to talk about it?" he eventually asks quietly and she melts at the concern in his voice. Her arms are crossed in front of her, reflecting her insecurity and she sighs. Saying nothing, it only takes a few steps to close the distance between them and she lets her head fall against his shoulder when she's close enough. His arms come to wrap around her and pull her close immediately and she lets out the smallest of whimpers, determined not to cry.

"It's stupid, Mike," she mumbles against his shirt and he runs his thumb up and down her back. "I don't care, El. If something's bothering you, I want to help you." "But..." "Hey. Let me help you." Her exhale is shaky and she nods her head against his shoulder. "Okay," she whispers and pulls back so she can look him in the eye. As he leads her over to the couch and flops onto it, she follows and

contemplates the best way to go about saying this. The million different ways she's been rehearsing it in her head suddenly don't sound quite right, so, in true El fashion, she just blurts it out bluntly, grabbing hold of his hand as a sort of anchor and he doesn't hesitate before clasping it.

"The only compliments I ever get are about how I talk. No one says anything about who I am. It's always about my speech."

She lets her words hang in the air, dangling dangerously, but she's relieved she finally told someone. And that had been the best way she could've described it. She was so sick of her speech, something that had been impaired thanks to who she used to be, being the only thing that she received attention for. Didn't anyone care about who she was? About the person she had worked so hard to become?

Mike's thumb traces lazy circles on her hand and it's a while before he finally says anything. And it ends up being the thing she least expected. "But...I compliment you all the time." When she turns to look at him, she sees a hint of sadness in his deep brown eyes, and it clicks where his train of thought had headed. She rushes to reassure him, saying, "No, Mike it's not you. I like your compliments. It's...everyone else. It's like...it's like they don't see me," she tells him with a sigh, turning her gaze back down to the ground. For the millionth time, she's grateful that he can understand her with such simple words.

Something inside her knows her self worth comes from more than the way she can talk, but years of feeling worthless combined with the way she's been treated lately is tearing down what she thinks is true. And sure, with him all her doubts about herself disappear like that as he gives her all the love he has to offer, but when she goes out in the world, she can't help how quickly they come back to life.

Mike remains silent as he reaches around to put an arm around her shoulders and pull her against him. She's not sure what she expects him to do about this, if she expects anything, but just to be held by him is something she realizes she definitely needs right now.

"I'm sorry, I know it's stupid," she reiterates, suddenly feeling the need to rationalize her thoughts and brush them off as inferior. "I don't understand why I feel this way." "Just because you don't

understand something doesn't make it stupid," he mumbles against her hair. Her lips curl up into a smile, because he's right. He's always right.

A few moments pass before he quietly tells her, "You know you're worth so much more than how you talk to me, right? I was yours back when you barely said anything," and her heart feels like it's about to burst. She raises her head to tenderly kiss his cheek, pouring all her gratitude into the simple action, before letting her face fall back into the crook of his neck contently. No longer does she cling to him for comfort, but she now remains tangled in his arms because being this close to him warms her from the inside out—always has, always will. Her problem temporarily resolved, she lets it go for the night, choosing to stay cuddled against him instead.

She's almost forgotten about their conversation by the time she next sees him, about a week later (far too long in their opinions). But, she's heard from him every night when he's gotten in the habit of calling her over the SuperComm again, this time not to let her know that he's still waiting for her, but to whisper that she's beautiful and he loves her for who she is. She knows it's in response to her doubts and insecurities, but it still means the world to her and she absolutely cannot wait to see him today. She's so wrapped up in her excitement as she stands in his entryway waiting for him to finish getting ready that she almost misses it when Mrs. Wheeler speaks to her. "How are you Eleanor?" she calls from the kitchen and El has to do a double take, ending up just staring at her probably longer than she should have.

"I'm fine, how are you?" she responds timidly as she walks into the kitchen, watching Mike's mom flit about, putting various things away. "I'm good, thanks for asking!" she replies and El nods, still perplexed as to why she's suddenly being addressed. "How's Hopper doing?" El shrugs. "Same as usual. Stressed, but doesn't want to admit it," she replies and when Karen gives a small chuckle, the corners of her lips involuntarily twitch up into a smile. "Of course he is. I'm glad you two are doing well," she says as she turns her attention to the dishwasher. "What are you and Mike up to today?" "Ice cream," El says simply, her smile growing at the thought of what Mike had planned out for their little date. "Ah, sounds lovely. I hope he treats

you well," she responds and El quietly murmurs "He will," not quite loud enough for Mrs. Wheeler to hear. Sensing a lull in the conversation, her gaze flits over to the dirty dishes piled in the sink and without a second thought, she asks, "Do you want help with those?", gesturing to the teetering stack.

His mom pauses for a second, glancing over at the dishes then back to El, a pleasant smile making its way onto her face. "I can take care of it while you two go have fun together. But, thank you so much for offering, Eleanor. You are such a sweet girl, Mike's very lucky to have you," she tells her sincerely and like that, the weight on El's chest disappears. "And I'm lucky to have him," she responds clearly, before turning around when she hears footsteps on the stairs. "Mrs. Wheeler?" she calls, spinning back on her heel and the older woman glances up with a smile. "Thank you," El tells her quietly, knowing she's grinning like an idiot. Her confused expression isn't lost on her, but she replies, "You're welcome," all the same and with that, El heads out of the kitchen, feeling light on her feet as she glances up to find Mike coming down the stairs.

"Mike!" she cries and races up the steps to meet him halfway. "Did you hear what your mom said to me?" she asks in a very excited whisper and Mike just grins, moving so he's on her level. His hands rest on her shoulders so he can look her in the eye when he replies, "People love you for you, El. Please don't ever forget that," putting the cherry on top to her emotions and she's positively beaming as she pulls him in for a hug. He wraps his arms tightly around her and she feels her insecurities wash away, in their place, the reassurance that who she is inside is more than enough.

22. Geometry

El can't remember the last time she did her homework alone.

Their sophomore year, it became an unspoken ritual to pile into someone's basement every afternoon to chip away at their growing stacks of worksheets and packets and reports, probably because as high school got harder, the Party grew stronger. I know, sounds impossible, but the six of them were bound to each other in unexplainable ways.

What's even more surprising is they worked diligently and were able to focus, even though they were surrounded by their best friends. Not much was said, unless someone had a question or needed to take a break. It's not like they ignored one another, they were always very much aware of who was in the room with them, but they tended to put themselves in their own bubbles, determined to finish everything as soon as possible, with the goal of being able to hang out that night.

Which is probably why, when El set down her pencil and dropped her head into her hands, Mike was really the only one who noticed.

It's Monday afternoon and she's wishing Geometry was never invented.

It wasn't a secret that math wasn't her strongest area. She had been struggling with Geometry since the beginning of the year and had come to loathe the subject. Too many formulas and numbers and shapes clogged her brain and she had gotten the idea a little while ago that she'd never be able to remember it all, resulting in a class that frustrated her to no end.

But still, she refused to ask for help. Her friends had offered multiple times, but she always declined politely, claiming she wanted to figure it out on her own. Which was actually true—she had taught herself enough to get to this point and she didn't want to stop now. Plus, at this point, Max was in College Algebra and the boys were in Pre-Calc, so a small part of her felt bad that she was struggling with concepts that had become second nature to them.

The proof in front of her sits halfway finished, even though she's read and reread her notes countless times. Still, none of it makes sense and she's starting to be convinced that it will never make sense and she's gonna fail this class and Hopper will be furious and he'll take her out of school and she'll never get to see her friends again-

A hand lands on her knee. "Are you okay?" Mike's tender voice asks as she lifts her head up. She stares down at the paper in front of her feeling dejected and sighs when she feels him rest his chin on her shoulder, his cheek pressing against hers. Making no move to stop him from looking over her work, she rests her forehead against his hair, not wanting to look at what's in front of her for a second longer. If their friends take notice of what's happening, they say nothing as Mike begins to gently point out her minuscule errors. She grounds herself in his soft voice, listening more just to hear him than to figure out the problem. She knows she should probably be paying attention to what he's saying, but she just...needs a moment. When he's done she glances back at the piece of paper and reluctantly picks up her pencil. Her cheeks flame as she bashfully asks him to explain it to her again, vowing to listen this time. He agrees without a second thought and as he walks her through what to do again, his hand begins lightly scratching her back, a technique that always calms her down in any circumstance and he knows it.

She follows along with his instructions tentatively and step by step, the problem solves itself. And yet, she knows she did nothing, just wrote down what Mike told her to without comprehending any of it. "I'm sorry," she whispers and somehow, miraculously, he translates that as "I'm sorry I don't understand this." "Why don't you move on to something else, okay?" he tells her quietly and she finally nods, putting the paper back in its folder.

Stupid Geometry.

Despite Mike's gracious instruction, she still finds herself not quite catching on in the class, as if there's one piece of the concepts she's just missing and it's screwing up her whole understanding. And second semester is almost over. There's such a short amount of time to figure all this out, but the one thing that she keeps repeating is her friends are here. Mike is here. They can help her. They're gonna help her. It'll be okay.

But as much as she hates to admit it, having someone in the class she can also rely on for help would be nice. She can talk to the teacher just fine, but his directions aren't the easiest things to follow, using words she's never heard before that she's too afraid to ask the definitions of. Her classmates aren't horrible, but they're not Mike. Or Dustin. Or anyone in the Party. But if she really wants to pass this class, they'll have to do.

She's not thrilled at the prospect at actually having to talk to the people in Geometry with her, but during a work day, she finally worked up the courage to ask the person sitting across from her for help, since she'd witnessed them answer questions from the teacher faster than she could even comprehend said question.

And thank goodness she asked this person for help, because by the end of that class period, she felt like she had learned more in an hour than she had the entire school year.

—

Mike wasn't exactly excited when he opened his lunchbox that day. It's not like he minded leftovers, but this lasagna had to be at least a week old, leftover from the church potluck his mom had attended a while back. But, he's starving and he reluctantly starts shoving it in his mouth as the lunch bell rings and his friends start piling onto their lunch table, chatting enthusiastically about this and that. He launches himself into their discussion, always eager to participate, until a pair of arms wraps around him from behind and he feels a head rest against his.

"Hey El," Lucas immediately greets her, but by the looks on his friends' faces, he can tell she isn't in the best mood right now. He places his hands over hers and is about to turn to ask her what's wrong, when she whispers, "Can we go somewhere that isn't here?" into his ear as she tightens her hold on him. He nods immediately, hoping that whatever happened didn't hurt her too badly as he finishes chewing his pasta. "We're gonna go," Mike tells the party in a tone that signals that it isn't up for discussion. Not like they would object anyway, they know how much she needs him and vice versa. Packing up his lunch, he slings his backpack over his shoulder and takes her hand as she tugs him outside.

Thankfully, the April sun hasn't coaxed too many of their classmates outdoors yet, so the big tree that sits at the far end of the lawn has yet to be occupied. The shade underneath provides relief as they settle down on the grass, criss-cross applesauce, facing one another. But they could be frying in the sun and he'd still be concerned about what's making her so upset today.

"Geometry or Biology?" he asks when he sees she's struggling to find what she wants to say. Those are the only two classes she's struggling in and judging by her expression, he's guessing this has something to do with academics. She shoots him a half-hearted smile, before responding with "Geometry."

"Okay, well, what was the concept? You know I would be more than happy to help you figure it out," he tells her, hoping to ease her anxiety.

But to his dismay, she shakes her head. "No, Mike, it's not about...the class." He cocks his head and waits for her to continue. "I...I made a new friend," she finally admits, glancing down at her hands.

Okay, now Mike is really confused. The fact that she's branching out is awesome, so why does she look so burdened by this new development? "El, that's great! Who is it?" At his words, she bites her lip and Mike feels his stomach start to sink, although he can't place his finger on why.

"Jeremy. He's helping me," she mumbles, so quietly he almost didn't catch what she said.

Almost.

Oh. It's a boy.

Taking his position as El's tutor, the one that brings Mike so much joy and now El will never want to ask for his help and she'll stop being curious around him and never ask to hear his explanations ever again-

He shuts down that train of thought real fast as he sighs, running a hand through his hair.

"Please don't be mad, or...or jealous," she says hurriedly, honestly sounding like she's about to cry. "I just needed more help and he sits next to me and..." "El, calm down, I'm not mad at you," he tells her, not quite meeting her eyes. "But you're not happy."

This is true. He's not. And when he glances up again, she's looking him expectantly, albeit a bit worried. So he starts talking. And once he starts talking, he doesn't stop, knowing she'll listen graciously, thank goodness.

"If I'm being honest, I've always kind of felt bad that you're stuck with us," he starts and she cocks her head to the side, opening her mouth to refute him, but he keeps going. "The party...we got to choose each other. We became friends because we wanted to. Out of all the kids in our school, we found each other because we all liked the same things and our personalities work so well together. You...you never had that choice. We only met out of pure luck and sure, it makes sense that you would stick with us that week, because...well...you were scared and running from...from them. And then...and then those horrible 353 days happened and you came back to us and...and you had no obligation to be with us anymore."

'What am I saying?' his mind whispers as he says things that have been buried by the reassurance that she truly does care for him. 'The truth,' another part of him whispers back.

"You could've gone out and made friends and found people you like better than us, because, El believe me, there are so many people better than us, and you have every right to, because no one gave you the opportunity to make friends the way you're actually supposed to make friends.

And I know it's stupid, but I keep realizing that it's possible that you find some other kids that you actually want to be friends with out of your own free will and you'll join their group and leave the group of nerds that helped you for just one week. You deserve better than us, El. And I know I shouldn't be jealous, or mad, because you're not my property-" "But you're my boyfriend," she interjects, and he shrugs, before continuing. "But that doesn't mean you have to be trapped to just me and the Party. I want you to go out and meet other people and ask them for help on your math homework and not have my

personal feelings affect your decisions. I want you to make friends normally. With people...people you'll probably like better than us...who will benefit you more than us..." he trails off and refuses to meet her gaze, his face flushing and his heart racing at the thought of the scenario he's describing.

He hates this. He hates admitting how little he can control her finding other smarter, funnier, kinder people. But he forces himself to keep going. "So...so don't let us tie you down, okay? Don't let me hold you back. That's the last thing I want to do. I'm always gonna be yours no matter what you do even...even if you don't want to be mine all the time. I just..." he pauses, realizing he's reached the end of his thoughts. "I'm sorry, I know none of that probably made sense and...and didn't really have a point. We...we can go, I'm sorry, I won't keep bothering you about this, I'm sure Jeremy's great," he mumbles and rises to his feet, reaching for her hand, intending to help her up, his heart still pounding madly.

She grabs it and tugs on it, not moving from her spot. "Sit," she commands and he does. "I know what you're gonna say," he says as he plops back down and she raises her eyebrows challengingly. "You're gonna say you're friends with us because you want to be and I should stop worrying about you going away, because all you did was find someone to help you in math, but you also want to make other friends."

She's quiet, taking his hand into her lap and delicately playing with his fingers as she shakes her head with a small smile. "You're scared." It's not a question, it's a blatant statement. And it's absolutely true. He blinks, before responding. "Yeah, yeah I'm scared. I'm...I'm absolutely terrified you're gonna leave us. That you're gonna leave me. Because I'm never, ever gonna let you go. And I'd spend the rest of my life pleading with you to come back...I know, I sound so clingy, I'm sorry El, I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"Mike." "Yeah?" "Stop." "Stop...?" "Stop being scared. Trust me." "But how can I just...stop, when I know how easy it would be for you to walk away?"

Before he can process what's happening, she darts forward and her lips land on his and she's kissing him fiercely, leaving his head

spinning and his heart thumping wildly, now for a completely different reason.

"I stay with you because I can and there's no one who can be all that you are. Jeremy is helpful, but he's not you. Trust me every time I say I love you."

A two minute rant from him dissolves with a ten second statement from her. His forehead falls against hers, and she accepts it gladly, skimming her fingers up to the nape of his neck. "I'm gonna make friends, Mike. But I won't make best friends. And I'll never, ever get another boyfriend."

With a quick peck that turns into three more, he feels at peace, no longer worried that she's going to just disappear because she found someone nice to ask for help. At least her resolve to attempt the class on her own has gone away. He resists the urge to beat himself up for not coming to that conclusion sooner, knowing that would be pointless and loses himself in her swirling chocolate eyes instead.

They spend the rest of lunch outside, taking advantage of the time alone together, something that school makes almost impossible. They let their worries melt away as they talk about anything they feel like talking about and their antics are nothing short of adorable. In between shared complaints of boring teachers and stories of how home life is going, he feeds her spoonfuls of his yogurt and she rewards him with feather-like kisses all over his face as he grins like an idiot.

When the bell rings, signaling that it's time to go to class, they're both reluctant to leave one another and they're noticeably more clingy as they throw their trash away and head to their lockers. So much so that when she leaves to head to her art class on the other side of the building (but not before a long, lingering kiss that sends sparks down his spine), Will and Lucas immediately ask what's up with her and what they had talked about as they walk to their science class.

"She's just still stressed about Geometry," he explains. "It's really beating her up. They've got a test in a couple days and she doesn't feel prepared and she's frustrated about it." "Oh...well, is there anything we can do?" Will asks and Lucas looks at him expectantly.

"I think she needs all the help she can get," he admits, knowing that El, while not a fan of their friends knowing her weakness, could use a group of people rallying behind her, even if that group has to include Jeremy.

Lucas has been silent, but suddenly he speaks up as they walk into their classroom and dump their bags by their desks. "The test is on Friday, right? What if we dedicate Thursday's homework time to helping her study? We could get our homework done during lunch so it could be all about her," he suggests and Mike is on board right away. "Let's do it. We can talk about it this afternoon," he declares, before the bell rings and their teacher starts handing papers out.

Dustin and Max show support immediately when Will casually brings the idea up later, but El is resistant, as Mike knew she would be. She insists that she's fine and that they don't need to give up their time just for her, but when he gives her a pointed look to let her know that they know she's not fine, she agrees reluctantly, thanking them with a small smile on her face.

Thursday afternoon rolls around and the Party found themselves on the basement floor, surrounded by textbooks, worksheets and more flash cards than they could count. Snacks are piled high around them as they listen to El explain what she understands just fine and what she really needs help on. From there, they build up a study plan that they maintain for the rest of the afternoon, quizzing her on different theorems and trig identities and whatever else she asks for help on.

And it's fun. To the surprise of everyone there, they're actually enjoying themselves as they keep the mood light-hearted, teasing each other for not remembering anything from this class, coming up with ridiculous ways to remember the concepts that made her giggle and soon, their study session is a game. Get five right in a row and she got an Eggo, get ten right in a row and she got to kiss Mike (though she ended up doing that anyway), recite something faster than Dustin can and he'll give her a piggyback ride to all her classes the next day, the list goes on and on.

By the end of it, they feel confident their friend is prepared, but before she goes home, they all make sure she knew that this one test grade wouldn't define her. They want her to crush this test, but not so

much so that they'd be disappointed if she didn't. After they wish her good luck, since they won't see her until after she took it, she goes home and the rest of them high-five each other, happy they could provide assistance to a party member.

Mike isn't worried about it in the slightest. She's got this and he's so proud of her. Tomorrow's gonna be a great day, he reassures himself as he slips into bed.

It was a completely ordinary morning for him. El was going to go in early to review her notes with the teacher, so he met the rest of his friends outside by the bike rack and they entered the building as a group, just like they always do. His first three classes were nothing super special and he finds himself happy to be relieved of the monotony of the day by the time their fourth period lunch rolls around.

His thoughts suddenly flicker to El as he collects his R2-D2 lunchbox from his locker and he prays her test went well. He's so excited to see her and congratulate her on finally doing the thing she's been dreading that when he spots her curly hair through the sea of students, he thinks he's just seeing things.

But when he catches a glimpse of her face and his entire world screeches to a halt, he knows this has to be real.

All sound simply fades out and he's left with a silence, a muffled silence. He only vaguely registers his breathing hitch and his heartbeat speeding up, because only one thing matters right now.

She's crying. El's expression is one of defeat and anguish and it rips his heart right in two. She's shuffling towards his locker, weaving in between people who have just become obstacles at this point, and trying desperately to hide her tears, swallowing them back in, refusing to admit her vulnerability until she's reached him. But he can see right through the mask she puts on for the world, because only around him does it come off. The high school hallway no longer exists, his vision has tunneled, the lunchbox in his hands long forgotten.

As she gets closer, the backpack on his shoulders slides off seemingly

at its own accord, hitting the ground at his feet, the thud lost under the racing of his thoughts. It's a subconscious move—knowing that embracing her, enveloping her fully with no obstructions, just him and nothing else, is what she's seeking.

Dodging the last student oblivious to the world around them, her books spill onto the floor, falling out of her arms without a second thought. Her gaze locked with his, her composure crumbling step by step, she rejects her backpack as well, slipping out of it half-heartedly and letting it join the rubble at their feet.

His arms have been open for her the second he met her eyes and she falls into them with the tiniest of sobs. He has a feeling he knows what made her so distraught, but he doesn't even think of getting what happened out of her, knowing how fragile his girl is. They stand pressed up against one another as he holds her in the tender, comforting way she needs to be held in while her world falls apart. Heads on shoulders, chests flush against the other, arms tight, secure, warm. He loses track of how long they stand there, oblivious to the hallway around them, oblivious to the material things at their feet, oblivious to the high schoolers and teachers that just don't get it.

And even when he thought she was starting to calm down, another wave of tears would wash over her and he'd gently guide her head further into the crook of his neck as she held onto him like he'd disappear the second she stepped away.

He squeezes his eyes shut in an attempt to keep his own tears at bay (a task that the broken nature of her muffled whimpers makes very difficult) and when he opens them again, his gaze lands on the schoolwork strewn about at their feet.

His eyes flicker to her Geometry folder and, peeking out of it is what he can only assume to be the test they had just taken. But what surprises him is that, written at the top in an authoritative red pen is a large "B-".

"El?"

Her only response is a timid cry and he drops his lips to her ear so she's the only one who can hear him. "You know a B- isn't bad, right?"

That's above a passing grade and I'm sure-"

Her voice is low and shakes unbearably as she cuts him off. "I had the lowest score in the class. Mr. Johnson even said so. And..." At this point, she nearly crumples with the weight of her sob and he has to concentrate on keeping her upright. "And...and J-Jeremy..." He can't help it. His blood starts to boil and he grips her tighter. "Jeremy said he was di-disappointed in m-me."

She hates humiliation from adults. She had to put up with it for twelve years. But humiliation and utter disappointment from people her own age? It breaks her in half.

Ignoring how badly he wants to hunt Jeremy down, he instead focuses on bringing comfort to the girl in his arms in every way he knows how. He scatters kisses on her forehead, on her temple, on her cheeks as his fingers play softly with her hair, letting his actions do all the work, knowing there are no words on earth that could fix this moment.

What Mike doesn't know is their friends have come looking for them by now and have stopped short at the solemn sight before them. Nervously, they exchange glances, knowing full well what this is probably about and it pained them to see how upset she was.

It's Dustin who steps forward first. El's cheek is against Mike's shoulder and he makes sure to be in her line of sight so he doesn't scare her, before wrapping his arms around two of his best friends, resting his head against her shoulder. She hiccups slightly at his touch, but shows no signs that she's uncomfortable and he swears he feels her body relax, if only marginally. Their friends are quick to follow, Will going to the other side of the couple and embracing them tightly. Lucas comes to wrap his arms around the shoulders of Mike and Dustin, his hand resting on El's back comfortingly and Max mirrors him, embracing Will and El to complete their group hug.

Not a word is said, save for El's mumbled "Thank you" as she continues to cling to Mike, but every one of them can read between the lines and knows how much she appreciates their actions and the effect being wrapped up in the arms of her five favorite people has on her. They stay there in their little cocoon, offering all the love and

support they can to El in the middle of the high school hallway for what seems like forever as they let time pass around them.

Later, as the Party is gathered in Dustin's basement and El is curled up to Mike's side, they'll spend all the time they need to patiently explain how little grades actually matter and how stupid it is that they let a letter define you. Their reasoning and logic will put things into perspective and they'll slowly pull her out of the hole she's fallen into.

For now, she's still at rock bottom, but she can finally see the ladder her friends have dropped to help her start climbing up. She doubts she'll ever be able to repay them for everything they've done for her and how wonderful every one of them is.

So she accepts their love graciously, knowing they want nothing in return. Something inside of her shifts and she no longer sobs out of misery, but her soft tears are for her friends. They're for the Zoomer, the Ranger, The Bard, the Cleric. And the Paladin that the Mage fell in love with.

23. Fireworks

A/N: I have to post this a day early, but happy Fourth of July everyone! And for those of you who aren't American, happy Day-Where-Americans-Eat-Junk-Food-And-Blow-Things-Up!

"Halfway happy" was not a phrase that Mike had come to like. "Halfway happy" usually meant he still kind of got what he wanted, but there was something significant missing that he was convinced would ruin everything. Usually, what that meant was he still got time with El, it's just that it wouldn't be everything he had hoped for. . .

Like tomorrow night, for example. It's July 3rd and Mike is standing outside in the sweltering heat, begging Hopper to let El go watch the fireworks that they shoot off at the quarry in honor of their country's birthday. And, as usual, Hopper's response is a firm, cold "no" and he pins him with how exposed she would be and how everyone watching the fireworks would be too distracted to notice if a bunch of government people showed up and tried to take her. Mike fires back with the fact that it will be dark and his parents would be there, along with the rest of the party and he even tries inviting Hopper himself to come along with him, but the chief's mind was made up. El is not allowed to go to the quarry to watch Fourth of July fireworks and that was final.

She's just as mad about his decision as Mike is, but before she can throw yell at him about it, her eyes flit to the roof of the cabin and she has a realization. Much to his dismay, she tugs him out of earshot of her adoptive father.

He's fuming as they walk further away from Hopper, muttering under his breath how stupid it is that she can't experience one of the best celebrations of the year. Yes, there will be plenty of fireworks to come in her lifetime and it's not like this is the only opportunity for her to see them, but, like many things these days, these are her first. Ever. Deep down, he knows that the decision is ultimately to keep El safe and away from prying eyes and he respects that as it matches his own need to make sure she's protected. Still, he can't help the annoyance that creeps up into him and it's only when El gazes up at him that he feels it start to dissolve.

"The quarry's that way, right?" she asks quietly, pointing over his shoulder with one hand, the other lightly gripping his forearm. He turns around and glances in that direction, picturing the location of the quarry in his head. "Yeah. Yeah, it's actually somewhat close to here," he responds, turning back to face her and lifts his eyebrows when he sees a small smile creeping onto her lips. "Why?" "If I sit up on the roof, do you think I can see them?" Realization dawns on him and he slowly nods. "You definitely could. You can see them from pretty much anywhere in Hawkins if you're high enough," he tells her, getting more excited by the second. Thank goodness, he doesn't think he would've lived if she didn't get to see any fireworks at all this year.

"How do you get up there?" he asks curiously, inspecting the cabin behind her. "Mike." Her soft voice holds a teasing tone when it pulls his attention back to her and his eyes widen when she suddenly is eye level with him. He looks down to see her feet hovering a few feet off the ground and he chuckles in shock. "Right. That," he says in disbelief, reaching over to take her hand as they walk back to Hopper. As he threads their fingers together, he mumbles, "You're so cool," and she blushes in response, squeezing his hand.

The chief has no problem with their "halfway happy" plan, as El calls it and Mike squelches the twist in his stomach at her choice of words. "So, I'll be over here at about eight tomorrow, does that work?" he says, turning back to her and she furrows her brow. "You'll be here?" she questions and gestures in the direction of the quarry. "But wouldn't you rather go..."

He cuts her off before she can go any further. "Of course I'm gonna come watch fireworks with you, you'd think I'd let you be alone?" She still looks disbelieving and tries again, saying, "But the Party...you'd have a better time with—" He doesn't let that sentence get very far either. "I've seen fireworks with them for at least ten years straight. This is really special for you and there's no way I'm gonna miss your first time seeing fireworks. Plus, I don't think I could stand it if I was off watching the same thing you were and knowing you were alone."

She finally gives in and breaks out in a brilliant grin that makes his insides flip. "Okay," she murmurs. "See you at eight." "See you at eight," he replies and wraps his arms around her, squeezing her tight

before releasing her and mounting his bike. "I'll call you tonight, okay?" They never, ever part with a "goodbye". It hurts too much. And neither one can stand it if they don't know when they'll see the other next, so confirming the next time they'll have contact are always their parting words, to the relief of the pair. "Okay. Talk to you then," she says with a wave and he rides off, already looking forward to seeing her smiling face again.

El's already perched on top of the roof by the time he gets there the following night. She waves when he pulls up on his bike and he sends her a goofy grin back.

She watches as he ditches his bike under their porch, then glances up at her. "Ready?" she calls. "Ready," he responds and soon enough that familiar force wraps itself around his body, tugging him up, up, up and he struggles not to look down, knowing it would probably freak him out, until his feet land on the shingles of the cabin roof. Once he's up there, he finds she's brought everything they need up with her—plenty of blankets, a flashlight for when it gets so dark they won't be able to see and a plate of toasted Eggos that he knows won't last long. He accepts the waffle she holds out to him and settles down beside her. "Did you see the sunset?" he asks, taking a bite as she unrolls a blanket and promptly wraps it around first his shoulders then hers.

Nodding, she scoots over until she's pressed up against his side and his hand slips into hers effortlessly. "Pretty," she murmurs, referring to the colorful hues of orange and pink that had covered the sky just minutes ago. Now, the last hints of daylight are starting to slip away, creating a dark canvas that the burning colors of celebration will soon cover. "It made me think of you," he tells her softly and she rests her head on his shoulder in response without a moment's pause.

Really, he's always thinking of her, but majestic picture nature had painted as he biked through their small town to get to her cabin became even more special because he knew they were both watching it and anticipating their time tonight together.

As night descends across the town, they find themselves relaxing against each other in a comfortable silence, his thumb drawing lazy

circles across the back of her hand. Soon it's just them and the sound of the crickets humming throughout the woods and Mike couldn't have been more content. He finds El's warmth is making him drowsy, but the split second Mike closes his eyes, the girl beside him gasps. "Firefly," she says simply, pointing to the single lightning bug that's fluttering toward them. He grins as she reaches her hand out, hoping to coax it to come closer, its glowing light dancing through the dark.

It's then that he realizes that they're everywhere and he points this out to her. He can see them wherever he looks, by the ground, in the trees, above them, they suddenly emerge for their lazy, nightly flight. She giggles as more start making their way toward the two and when one lands on her shoulder, she freezes in awe. "Why are they all coming for me?" she asks breathlessly as they take in the sight around them.

Mike doesn't think twice. "Maybe they just want to get closer to your beautiful face," he says, only partly regretting it the minute the words are out of his mouth. She sits up so she can look at him, scaring the firefly off her shoulder but she doesn't notice, because she's too busy giving him a look that's halfway between confused and flattered. He meets her gaze with raised eyebrows and her resolve breaks first as she grins and boops his nose with her finger. "Cheesy," she murmurs accusingly, but he can hear the adoration in her voice. "You're welcome," he replies, nudging her playfully and she giggles again, effectively making his stomach flip.

He's so busy admiring her smile when she laughs and the way her eyes crinkle that when they hear a boom in the distance, he could've sworn it was his own heart bursting with how much love he held for her. Which actually probably took the title of "The Cheesiest Thought He Had That Night" from the previous firefly comment.

But anyway. Fireworks.

Fireworks that catch El's attention immediately and she shoots to her feet as soon as the first one goes off. It doesn't even seem like she notices that she wobbles a little on the slanted roof, she's captivated by the blue and green fiery flower that just lit up the sky. And the pink one after that. And the red one after that.

Her mouth hangs open slightly and he can hear her awestruck gasps with each firework that bursts just above the treeline. He smiles and stands to join her, glad they are indeed visible from the cabin and she can get at least a sliver of the experience. Silently, he snakes his arms around her waist and holds her tight as they watch the display together. She sighs softly and melts into his embrace, the back of her head resting on his collarbone, her eyes trained on the fireworks, the reflections dancing across her warm brown orbs.

He thinks she's absolutely beautiful.

She thinks this is absolutely magical.

Fireworks are not a new concept for her. She had seen them on the television multiple times, mostly during the romantic climax of a soap opera when the couple would kiss and all of a sudden, fireworks would light up the sky for no good reason.

A small part of her is hoping for a mind-shattering, world-stopping, firework-inducing kiss, but she mostly is just so unbelievably happy to be here, in the arms of the one she loves most and watching the sky light up in celebration as the night air hums with crickets around them. And she honestly could watch them forever, each burst of color entrancing her as it rains down from the sky, only to give way to the next one. It's unpredictable, sparkly, creative and she loves it.

So when she can tell that the finale is starting, it makes her sad, but it's so spectacular that she quickly forgets about dreading them being over and is now holding her breath as the sky essentially explodes. She only barely registers Mike's arms tighten around her, but it's when the last firework fizzles out and she's left in awe that a thought occurs to her. Thinking twice about what she's saying is not a habit of hers, so she breaks the silence first.

"You're like a firework," she murmurs and she can feel him chuckle behind her. "How so?" he asks, a hint of laughter lacing his voice.

Even she'll admit that this is sappy, but hey, he started it. She rotates in his arms, locking her fingers behind his neck and he automatically starts swaying them ever so subtly, as if they're right back at the

Snow Ball six months ago.

"You always light up the darkness. And I didn't expect you, but when you showed up, everything was better," she tells him quietly.

Even though the sun dipped behind the horizon a few hours ago, she can still clearly see the blush that heats up his cheeks and she smiles sweetly. "Man, and I thought I was the cheesy one," he teases her as they continue to sway in each other's arms. Shrugging, she responds, "I like cheese," with as much of a straight face as she can handle, before leaning in and causing his chuckle to be lost in her mouth as she kisses him like she'd wanted to do since the beginning of the night.

Standing on a rooftop underneath the stars, it looks like something out of a movie as the young couple loses themselves in the other, letting the world fade out from around them.

It starts playful and she can feel his uncontrollable smile against her lips, but it quickly turns into something deeper as he pulls her closer and his lips part slightly as they move against hers in the most delicious way. In a bold move, he gently takes her bottom lip between his and the feeling is indescribable. Her brain is reduced to mush and all she can comprehend is him, her sweet, caring boy who gave up celebrating with his friends to wrap her in his arms as she experienced something new. In response, she lets out the tiniest gasp but doesn't move away, instead tilting her head just a little bit farther, letting her love for him overflow and adding yet another spark of passion to their kiss.

Really, since their lips connected, sparks have been flying. Some would even say there were so many that it could be mistaken for fireworks.

24. Rain

The first thunderstorm of the spring happened on day 114 and El quite honestly had forgotten how much she hated thunderstorms. There hadn't been one since last fall, thanks to the seasons quickly transitioned into winter and thus, bringing snow instead of rain. And as she's rapidly realizing, she much prefers the bitter cold of snow to this.

The first roll of thunder scares her so bad, her entire body jolts as an icy fear is dumped into her system. The book she had been attempting to read drops to the floor as she scrambles instinctively to the farthest corner of the bed, pressing her back up against the wall. Her eyes dart to the window pane and she takes in the menacing, dark clouds that have long since covered the evening sky.

A gasp is torn out of her when everything is momentarily brightened in a flash of light off in the distance before the awfully silent anticipation takes hold...one mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi-BOOM the thunder cracks loud and merciless across the land and she swears she can feel the rumble in her bones.

And she's absolutely terrified.

There's not an explanation or a reason behind her fear of thunderstorms, but that doesn't make them any less scary or intimidating. They're big and loud and unpredictable and she already just wants this to either be over as soon as possible or for someone to hold her as the storm wreaks havoc outside.

Then comes the rain. One second a few drops are sliding innocently down her window, plinking on the roof of the cabin and the next, it's like someone broke down the wall of a dam and forgot there was a planet underneath it. Within seconds, the earth outside is soaked and the thin walls of the cabin do nothing to muffle the noise, much to her horror. The raindrops are thick and powerful, barely concealing the sound of the wind as it whips through the trees, howling through the night. The wood of the cabin creaks in protest at the relentless beating from the storm and when the next crack of thunder sounds, she realizes with a start that she's shaking. Her hands tremble as she

sits petrified on the edge of her bed and she squeezes her eyes shut as the storm intensifies.

She knows Hopper is just outside, probably watching TV or reading the newspaper in the living room, but she's still wary of running to him for comfort. It's been three months, but her trust for him is still fragile, a result of his intimidating demeanor and his refusal to let her see Mike.

Mike.

If she doesn't snap herself out of this terrified state, she's bound to hyperventilate and pass out if she's not careful. It's happened plenty of times before, thanks to the amount of fear she dealt with back...back there, but she's determined not to let her anxiety get the better of her, not anymore. But that means getting help and Hopper's out of the question, so her only other option is the dark-haired boy who never failed to calm her down and make her feel warm and fuzzy inside. She just prays she'll be able to concentrate enough to reach him.

A particularly bright lightning strike forces a squeak out of her, but before she can second guess her actions, she darts across her room and grabs the black blindfold sitting on her dresser. Ignoring the way the rickety floor groans with every step she takes, she opens her door and is relieved to see Hopper decided to take a nap when he came home. Her mind latches onto the television and she drags it into her room, hastily shutting the door behind it. She finds the static as quickly as she can, the crackling barely drowning the sounds of the storm outside. With shaking fingers, she ties the blindfold around her eyes and tries her hardest to focus on anything but the thunder pounding menacingly.

By some miracle, she manages to fade away from her reality, slipping deliciously into nothingness. When her eyes open next, she's in the Void, and the blanket fort appears in front of her, revealing none other than her Mike sitting within its fabric walls, his SuperComm in his hand. She blows out a breath in relief as his voice dances through the space.

"...know I'm a bit early today," he's in the middle of saying as she

dashes over to him and crouches in front of the fort. "But I remember how much thunder scared you and...and I wanted to let you know that I'm here for you if...if the storm is freaking you out." He pauses and she smiles, despite the pounding of the rain still echoing occasionally through the empty plane. She can already feel her anxiety start to ease as she takes in everything about him. Despite seeing him and listening to what he has to say every night, she notes how much he's changed in only four months. He must be growing his hair out, because it's thicker and swoops lower on his head, framing his cheeks that have rounded out. His voice has only dropped a few notches, but she could care less because it still sends the same flurry of butterflies through her stomach.

When he speaks again, his cheeks are tinged with a delicate shade of pink. "If you were here-" He's interrupted suddenly by a clap of thunder that's amplified by the Void and she shivers, keeping her eyes trained on Mike, willing the rising tide of panic to subside. He winces and glances at what she assumes is a window. "If you were here, I'd give you a big hug," he mumbles and she can feel her heart swell, wishing desperately she could be wrapped up in his arms right now. "And...and I'd want to hold you until you weren't scared anymore...I'd tell you everything was okay and that...that I wasn't going anywhere." She watches as he sighs and grips his device a little harder. "I'm still not going go anywhere, El. I'm not going to quit calling you and I promise to call you during storms from now on. I hope you aren't scared right now. I wish I could help you."

She lets out a noise somewhere between a chuckle and a sob. No, no she's not scared, not anymore. Though she's not crying, she feels so much love and care from him right now, she can barely breathe. She knows she doesn't deserve the affections of Michael Wheeler, but never in a million years would she reject them. She's all but forgotten about the storm by now, her full attention on the wonderful boy in front of her, who she can never get enough of.

"I hope you're safe, El. And...and I hope I get to see you soon. I'll stay here until the thunderstorm ends, okay? Please don't be scared," he finishes.

Okay, now she's crying.

She sat in the Void with him for as long as she could that day, even though he was just sitting there and reading a comic book. His presence, or at least an image of it, was what kept her going these days and she was more than happy to spend a little extra time with him. When she finally had to go, she was so tired from the energy she had exerted that she fell asleep immediately when she got back, Mike's gentle, sweet voice floating through her thoughts.

There were two more thunderstorms in Hawkins after that, but none nearly as bad as the first. Still, El found that Mike was true to his word, not that she ever doubted him. During every storm, he never failed to be seated in the blanket fort, speaking soothing words into his walkie-talkie in an effort to calm the girl he so desperately hoped was alive.

Eventually, the harsh storms gave way to spring showers and she could finally breathe again during the soft humming of raindrops falling on their roof. In fact, she grew rather fond of their peaceful nature and slowly, but surely came to enjoy the rain. However, she always wished she could share those moments with a certain someone.

And then one day, she did.

...

It was the picture perfect afternoon that everyone dreams of.

No responsibilities, nowhere to be, nothing to do but listen to the spring rain pitter patter against the windowpanes and run down the sides of the house. Everything is serene, peaceful and for once, life has slowed down.

And Michael Wheeler is absolutely freezing.

Or, he would be, if it wasn't for the girl curled up to his chest, her chestnut hair tickling his chin while he runs his fingers through it as she plays lazily with his fingers. A blanket is draped over them and he's completely content, his body buzzing where El is pressed up against him...which is practically everywhere as they snuggle in his basement. His other arm, the one not tangled in her hair, lays in his

lap, and although he itches to hold her, she enjoys tracing the lines on his palm, admiring every curve, every mark of him. The rain is making them sleepy, but the sleepy where all you want is the presence of someone else. The warmth of another human being.

They made that happen as soon as the rain started. Pushing aside his studies, knowing he'd have plenty of time to do it later, they fell onto the couch and she got as close to him as she could, knees curled up on his lap, head resting contently on his chest, letting the shape of her body conform to his and he couldn't be happier. He never wants to move from this spot, which is good, because they don't have to for a couple solid hours. So they don't. They let the gentle sounds of the rain take them away as they rest curled up to one another, the intimacy exactly what both of them needed. No words are exchanged, but they both feel immensely safe and cared for in this moment, so much so that, when it overflows, he gently tugs his hand from her and wraps his arms around her small form, pulling her close against his chest. The small sigh she gives in return almost makes his heart burst, her hands curling into his shirt as her face nestles into his neck making his skin tingle.

He can't guarantee it, but he has a feeling he knows what she's thinking about because it's on his mind too.

There's something about rain that always draws them physically closer together and he's positive it has something to do with the night he found her. It had been pouring, soaking through his rain jacket, but they kept pushing on until their flashlight beams land on a small, shivering, vulnerable girl whose eyes captured his heart right then and there. He'd vowed to take care of her then and his resolve has yet to weaken. He'll always take care of her. Always. No matter what. The irony of him holding her, safe and dry in his arms as the very element that surrounded them when they met in the first place falls to the earth outside is too much and he softly plants the tiniest kisses against her hair.

He remembers a time when rain and thunderstorms made him think about her and only her. It got so bad that he started calling her early the second a storm turned violent, his mind, of course, on the night they met. If a storm had brought her to him, surely a storm could bring her home.

That hypothesis had been wrong, obviously. But when it was brought up some months after her return and he'd sighed in relief knowing his calls hadn't been in vain, she said something he'll never forget. "Mike, you chase away all my storms. Whether they're out there," she had gestured to a nearby window, "or in here," her finger tapping against her head.

Remembering that statement, the path of his kisses trails down to her temple, showering her in affection until she grins and burrows further into him if that's even possible.

The rain continues to thrum outside, but no longer are they lost in its rhythm, but in each other, in the wonderful, tender, passionate love they have for one another.

25. Summer

A/N: Hi friends! Today is my last day of summer, so I decided to share Mike and El's as well!

I know my past couple of one shots have been nothing but a bunch of adorable fluff and I hope you guys have enjoyed that, because the next one will be...very intense. Prepare yourselves.

"El."

"El."

Poke.

"Eleven."

Poke poke.

"El. Wake up."

..."El?"

He grins and rolls his eyes.

"El," he whispers softer and leans forward to tenderly kiss her cheek.

"Elllll," he singsongs, kissing her forehead.

"Eleeeeeeven." Kiss.

"El!!!, wake uuuuuup cutie." Kiss kiss.

"Mmmmm, what time izit?"

"Time for you to open your eyes." Kiss.

"But if I do, you'll stop doing this," she sighs, scooting closer to him in the bed.

He sighs and presses a soft kiss to her lips.

"Mmm, good mornin," she mumbles.

"Good morning, you sleep good?"

She nods, her eyes opening just a crack.

"Good. Well, I've got breakfast for us when you're ready, okay?"

"Mmmph." She rolls onto her side and stretches out her arms.

"You want me to...carry you to breakfast?"

He's joking. He knows what she wants.

Her lips curl up in a smile and she shakes her head, her eyes still not fully open, her arms still outstretched.

"Miiiiiiike," she whines.

"Okay, just for a little bit, alright?"

"Mmhm," she responds as he lifts up the edge of her blanket and

crawls in next to her. His arms go around her waist and he pulls her against him, flipping onto his back in the same motion so at least half of her lands on top of him. She cuddles into him like he's a giant teddy bear and he holds her close, breathing her in as her body relaxes.

Today is the last day of their summer vacation and they plan on spending it like most of their summer days have been, except now, it's about soaking every last second in before they're swept back into the whirlwind of high school.

For El, this marks the last day ever where she's not technically a student. Sure, she's already enrolled, she's met her teachers, but she still has yet to attend a class and officially start her education. Tomorrow, she'll join the rest of the Hawkins teenage population in school, a place she's only heard stories of from her friends. This was huge. She'd studied with the people who knew her best for about a year, desperate to be able to do what normal kids her age do and all her hard work paid off, because she now knew and understood enough to be a sophomore along with her friends. And while she won't have a full schedule, just a few classes a day to help her ease into it, this was still a very, very big deal for the girl who had been out in the real world for only a little less than three years.

But neither of them are thinking about that as El nuzzles her head into his chest and he smiles at how warm and relaxed she is, since she still hasn't woken up fully. His hand is tracing tiny circles on her back while the other keeps her in place and he couldn't be happier. He even starts to get sleepy as sunlight begins to light up the room, comfortable with El basically laying on top of him.

Everything starts to get fuzzy and deliciously swimmy as he fades from consciousness, clutching El to him until he realizes with a start that they have plans today. And while their schedule is structured to allow them some room to laze about, they still have to meet their friends in a couple hours.

Reluctantly, he nudges the girl snuggled up to him. "Ready for breakfast?" he asks, keeping his voice low and soft. She stirs eventually and lets out a big yawn before slowly opening her eyes and looking up at him. A warm glow spreads throughout him as he

takes in El's deep, rich orbs blinking up at him as she adjusts to the light, gazing up at him. He goes to sit up, but before he can, she shifts and kisses his lips gently.

"Good morning," she mumbles and he responds by pressing his lips against her cheek. "Breakfast?" "Okay," he whispers and it takes everything within him to pull away from her and let her sit up. But he manages to do it anyway and stands to his feet, stretching before saying, "I'm gonna go make sure it's still okay," and she nods, letting him go as she reaches for the brush on her dresser.

Mike smiles when he sees the Eggos he'd laid out on the table previously still look just the way he wanted them to. His stack is fairly normal, save for the obscene amount of syrup drizzled all over it, but hers is a work of art if he does say so himself. Knowing she also likes them stacked, he glued each waffle together with whipped cream and covered the top one with the white fluffy goodness. "El" is spelled out in blueberries and the strawberries he had previously cut up form a heart around the base, creating a masterpiece that he can't wait for her to see.

After opening the curtains to let in the morning light, he takes a seat and waits for her to finish getting ready, a routine he's never really understood because she would look pretty even if she had just rolled out of bed. A few minutes later, her door opens and he smiles at just how radiant she looks as she blushes under his gaze. It takes a second for her eyes to land on her breakfast, but when they do, her face lights up and she dashes to his side, planting a kiss on his cheek. His smile grows as she plops down into her seat and they dig into their waffles, a comfortable silence settling between them as they listen to the birds chirping outside and try to steal glances at the other when they aren't looking.

Honestly, Eggos taste so much better when he's with her and watching her enjoy the food he's responsible for getting her hooked on. At the rate she's devouring them, they finish quickly, and Mike offers to do the dishes so she can get her shoes on and grab whatever she needs for the day.

He meets her outside by his bike when she's ready and goes to stabilize it, intending for her to get on the back, but she hesitates.

"Mike?" she asks, looking up at him. "Yeah?" "Can I pedal today?" He raises his eyebrows and looks down at the bike. "...sure! You remember how?" he asks, making sure she feels safe. She nods and swings her leg over the seat. "I want to practice...is that okay?" "Yeah, yeah, of course! Just let me know if you get tired, okay? The arcade is pretty far from here," he tells her as he climbs on behind her. Once again, she nods, only half listening as she focuses on putting her hands and her feet in the right place.

He tries to ignore the way his stomach flips when he wraps his arms around her waist and when she glances behind her to make sure he's secure, her face is painted with the same blush that he's sure is on his, making him unable resist nuzzling his nose against hers.

It takes her a couple minutes to get used to having extra weight on the back as she pedals up the dirt road, but she gets the hang of it by the time they reach the pavement. He feels her relax as she gets into a rhythm and he settles his chin on her shoulder contently as the breeze flutters around them.

He's proud of her when she makes it all the way to the arcade without taking a break and he tells her so when they pull up in the parking lot. And although she beams at him, he knows they were both desperately wishing that could've lasted longer. Holding onto her as she rode through the streets made him understand exactly why she loved the back of his bike—he felt secure, warm, extremely content and sad that he hadn't planned this day for just the two of them because now all he wants to do is spend more time alone with her by her side. Not that that feeling is anything new, but he's already missing being that close to her and disappointed that he can't just cuddle with her in the middle of the arcade. One look at her face and he can tell she's thinking the same thing, but he settles for the hug she gives him after he locks up his bike. Hand in hand, they walk inside to find all their friends already waiting for them, chattering excitedly about all the games they wanted to play that day.

The arcade actually turns out to be a blast, even though they'd been there more times than he can count. It being the end of summer, none of them really have any reason to hold onto their loose change (except for maybe to pay for the ice cream they're getting after this, but Steve always gives them a discount if he's working), so today,

they didn't have any reason not to play as many games as many times as they wanted to. They hadn't had this much freedom since the time Hopper wanted them all out of the cabin and handed over all the coins he could find just so he would have some peace and quiet for once, so they exploited this as much as possible. The Party spent almost the entire afternoon running around, challenging one another to epic battles (Dustin and Lucas), trying over and over again to beat their previously set high scores (Max), discovering new games they'd never touched (El and Will) and cheering their friends on wherever they happened to be playing (Mike).

Right before the building shut down, they begged the manager to let them play one last round of pinball to close out the summer and he agreed immediately, knowing how much this place meant to these kids.

With a cheer, they rushed over to the two machines in the corner and quickly devised a system. Two people would play and the person with the lowest score would be replaced with someone else while the winner stayed. In order to be declared the winner, someone had to beat not one, not two, but all five of the other party members. Consecutively. Why? Because it was summer and they could.

It ended up taking them way longer than they thought, but they didn't care. They were way too engrossed in betting on one another and the way they were acting, you would think this was a competition to win a million dollars or something.

After a solid hour of playing, the final showdown had arrived. Dustin managed to pull ahead and had beaten every one of his friends...except one.

"Screw you, Dustin," Lucas mutters jokingly when he looks up, shaking his head upon seeing his friend has beaten him fair and square. Dustin laughs and jerks his head, motioning for his friend to leave his place at the machine. "Alright, this is it!" Will says excitedly as Dustin turns to face the Party. "The Final Showdown!" he calls dramatically. "El, you ready?"

Dustin had beaten Max. And Will. And Mike. And Lucas. But one remained. And she intended to take him down.

"Are you?" she says challengingly, taking her place at the machine and quirked an eyebrow as her friends laugh behind her. She feels a familiar hand fall on her waist as she grasps the lever and a pair of lips is pressed against her cheek, before Mike whispers, "For luck," in her ear. Grinning up at him, appreciating his Princess Leia quote, she exhales heavily and turns her attention to the machine. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here to witness the last battle, the eternal fight, the final showdown between El Hopper and Dustin Henderson!" Will's dramatic voice comes behind them. The two slip their coins into the machine and it whirs to life once again. As the ball is dispensed into the spot and the lights flash on, Dustin looks over at El and shoots her his signature purr, displaying all his teeth menacingly. "Mouthbreather," she responds with a smirk and he chuckles.

"On your mark!" She grips the lever once again. "Get set!" They both pull it back and wait, her heart beating rapidly, her concentration zeroing. She can do this. "And!" "Come on Will!" Dustin says, his face also a mask of concentration. "...GO!" their friend cries and she lets the lever go, making the ball shoot up into the maze of tunnels and contraptions.

She quickly gets in the zone, hitting the buttons on the side exactly when she needs to, keeping her eye on the ball the whole time as it bounces around sporadically. Behind them, their friends are silent, an odd contrast to the usual cacophony of cheers and banter. However, now, they're all watching with rapt attention, holding their breaths, not daring to move as they watch their friends expertly keep the ball alive.

It's intense, to say the least, and it's clear why these two deserved to be battling each other for the final title. They're racking up points faster than they can count, bells and sound effects going off constantly. It takes a while for the ball to finally fall down the hole, consequently ending the game, but when it eventually happens...

Their gazes all turn simultaneously up to the scoreboards. El's machine reads "19,385,400" and Dustin's "19,079,275".

Silence. And then...

They explode. "YEAAAAAH EL!" "WHOOOO YOU DID IT!" "HA, I

KNEW SHE WOULD WIN!" "IN YOUR FACE, DUSTIN!" She laughs in disbelief, staring up at her score as her friends celebrate around them. Dustin's mouth is hanging open when she glances over at him and he looks...really sad, actually. She smiles and wraps him in a hug, apologizing for stealing his title from him. He chuckles and congratulates her, even offering to pay for her ice cream as a reward, to which she politely declines, saying Mike's got her covered. Which is true...kind of.

She's met with a ton of hugs and high fives when she turns back to her friends and Mike even picks her up, spinning her in a circle as she giggles, still high off adrenaline.

Of course, this was an event that went down in history and they would be talking about this for a very, very long time. Her friends will even make her a crown for her birthday that reads "Queen of Pinball" and she'll cherish it forever.

When they finally make it out of the arcade in high spirits, she hops on the back of Mike's bike and they all head off to the mall, excited to see Steve and tell him about what just went down.

"I can't believe you're better at pinball than me," Mike says, shaking his head as they coast behind their friends. She chuckles and rests her head against his back. "You're the one who taught me to play," she points out teasingly, remembering the day she was first allowed to go to the arcade and they'd started with pinball once they were there, since it was a fairly easy game to operate. And it gave Mike an excuse to put his hands over hers. "You're right. I never thought I'd see the day an apprentice takes down his own master," he replies and she can hear the smile on his voice. However, that situation sounds oddly familiar to her and it isn't until they've all parked their bikes in front of the mall and are heading inside that it strikes her where she's heard that before. "Darth Vader and Obi-Wan!" she says excitedly out of the blue and her friends all look at her. "What about them, El?" Lucas says as they dodge rowdy groups of teenagers and pairs of moms who look like they've been to every store in the building.

"Master and apprentice," she says simply, looking to Mike, hoping he'll make the connection between their previous conversation and one of his favorite movies of all time. "Oh...oh! I understand!" he

exclaims, flashing her a smile before sheepishly explaining the situation to everyone else.

'I understand' weren't words they necessarily needed to say, since they never had any trouble comprehending what the other was expressing, but that didn't mean they didn't like to reference the first week they met every once in a while. It baffled them both how quickly they not only became attached to each other, but how transparent they immediately were to the other, their understanding of the way they functioned and saw the world beyond what they could comprehend. 'I understand' was a nod to the day El had first said those words to Mike, realizing she truly could connect with him.

The analogy is found quite ingenious by the Party and they talk over one another as they build and expand on it, pointing out that Obi-Wan did claim he'd come back more powerful once he was struck down, much to Mike's amusement and they even jokingly suggest that El had turned to the dark side, making her able to rise up without anyone noticing, much to her amusement.

Needless to say, Steve is very, very confused when the gang shows up to Scoops Ahoy going on and on about El being like Darth Vader and the rest of them accidentally creating a Sith Lord, but he doesn't even bother asking, knowing they probably would never shut up. So instead he greets them with, "What do you nerds want?", which diverts their attention pretty quickly, thank heaven above.

"What do you want today, El?" Mike asks her as they take in all the flavors the store has in stock this week and she can already feel her mouth watering. "Chocolate," she responds instantly. Sometimes it's cotton candy, sometimes it's something fruity, but today, she's feeling something richer. He chuckles and turns to Steve. "We'll take the Triple Fudge in a cup," he orders and their friend behind their counter smirks as he opens the glass cover. "A scoop for you and a scoop for the lady?" he asks, throwing El a wink, to which she smiles back at him and nods, while Mike's face turns a bright red. "We always share, you know this, Steve," he says in irritation as he pulls out his wallet to pay for their dessert. "Yeah, and you always do it in the most disgustingly cute way, how can I resist teasing you?" Harrington retorts as he rings him up. Apparently, everyone else had been listening, because Dustin chimes in with, "THANK you, I'm glad

someone agrees!" Mike and El just roll their eyes as they stick their spoons into their ice cream and walk back over to join their friends.

"Dustin, you know when you get a girlfriend, you're gonna regret all the times you've teased us, right?" Mike tells him as they exit the mall and head for the bikes. "Well, the joke's on you Wheeler, because I'm very much forever alone, so I doubt you'll ever be able to return the favor." Despite the grin on Dustin's face as he announces his relationship status, the hint of sadness behind his eyes doesn't go unnoticed and El suspects that he isn't as enthusiastic about his predicament as he might seem.

"You'll find her one day, Dustin," she says to him, flashing a smile. He visibly softens at her words and she pats him on the back. "Thanks, El," he mumbles. And they leave it at that.

Not wanting their day to be over so soon, Mike and El bid their friends farewell as one by one, they hop on their bikes and ride home. Soon, it's just the two of them and their ice cream. "Want to go to the park?" Mike asks, handing the cup to her and she nods, taking a bite while he links their arms.

They stroll down the path into their city park, smiling when they see all the kids running around and climbing on the playground while the exhausted parents take a break on the benches. "Isn't it weird to think that at this time tomorrow, none of these kids will be here? They'll all be in a classroom, wishing they were back here," Mike comments as he leads them to a more quiet area.

At the mention of school, El feels her mood shift and she merely nods in reply. Yes, it is weird to think about and it's weird to think that she'll be one of them. For the first time, it started to sink in that tomorrow, she will officially be a "normal kid", or at least, as close to one as she can be. And she can't decide if that excites her or terrifies her.

Mike must've sensed her demeanor change because he disposes of their now empty ice cream cup and pulls her down with him onto the grass under the shade of the looming trees. They lay down on their backs, scooting so their shoulders are touching and they can hold hands as they stare up at leaves.

"What're you thinking about?" he asks quietly when she's been silent for a while. She tosses his question around in her mind and he waits patiently before she finally speaks. "Mike, do you think I'm ready?" "For tomorrow?" She nods. "Yeah, I do," he responds without a shred of hesitation and she sighs, his confidence taking the edge off her jumble of uneasiness. "Do you?" he asks after a moment's pause.

It scares her, that's for sure. It's going to be...a lot. A lot of work, a lot of concentration, a lot of interaction, a lot of learning and she can't pinpoint exactly why, but the whole thing is making her nervous. But is she ready for it?

"I hope so," she says barely above a whisper and he tenderly squeezes her hand. "You are. I know you are," he replies definitively. "I promise you're smart enough." His words make her smile, but it's not just what happens in the classroom that she's worried about. She's actually excited to be taught every single day and yes, she's a little nervous that she won't be able to keep up with the workload, but she's seen her friends do it before, which means that it's manageable. No, what is making her anxious more than anything is it won't just be the Party that she'll be around.

"Do you think they'll like me?" Her voice is vulnerable and shakes just the tiniest bit. "They" meaning the teachers, the staff, her counselor and more importantly, her classmates. Mike has explained to her before how high school cliques work and how everyone seems to have their own little place, and if they move out of their stereotype, they aren't treated in a very kind way. But she's okay with that—she isn't looking to join a certain clique or mess up the status quo, she just wants to be accepted by them.

"El, there isn't anything about you that people wouldn't like," he says softly, propping himself up on an elbow so he can look at her and she does the same. "I don't want to say that everyone will like you because...you know, some kids are mouth breathers." She winces at that, knowing, inevitably, she'd have to deal with bullies. And she was not looking forward to doing it without her powers.

"But hey, look at me." His earnest voice catches her attention and she looks back into his eyes. "I will not let anyone say or do anything mean to you. I won't stand for it. Even if I get in trouble, I'll make

sure no one can put you down. I don't even know why they would, because if they can't see how amazing you are, then, El, they aren't seeing you at all. But I'm going to be there for you because there are kids who're jerks. And I won't let them hurt you, okay?"

"Okay," she murmurs as he skims his fingertips up and down her arm, a reassurance that he's there and he won't leave her alone.

She was still nervous. She was still worried about what they would think and how she would interact with them. But her fears were overshadowed by something much bigger and much more powerful. The love Mike held for her and the promise that he'd be by her side. With those two things, she was invincible. She could conquer the entire world.

Or, at least, her first day of high school.

26. Anger

A/N: Today marks the one-year anniversary of this one shot book! *chucks confetti*

It's crazy how much has happened in the past year and how, through it all, this project has been a constant for me, giving me a creative outlet to, not only explore my writing style to my heart's content, but to obsess and cry and swoon over two of my favorite people who deserve the entire world. And you guys have supported me throughout this whole adventure-so, whether you've been here from the beginning (props to you, because *wow*, that's dedication!) or you're just joining in, thank you, thank you, thank you, I could not have done it without every single one of your kind reviews and the 190 people who have favorited and followed this book! I love each and every one of you!

On that note, I'm very sorry for this chapter, prepare for your emotions to be played with...I know I've used some of these themes in my one-shots before, but I thought I'd expand on them a little more! Also, shoutout to WisheEternal who inspired a pivotal point in this story.

(Please don't hate me for this!)

It's no secret that Mike and Eleven are people of extremes. It's one of the reasons they work so well together—they understand how intense the other's emotions can get if left unchecked. If they were sad, they were devastated, if they were happy, they were ecstatic, if they loved, it was fiercely and unconditionally. There was no in between, it was either all or nothing. And that's okay, because they both knew from experience how to deal with those raw, extreme emotions when they came out from the other person.

But what that also means is that the two both held fiery tempers that could blaze up in an instant and took a while to be cooled off and contained. Anger was one of the hardest emotions they had to deal with and it took some time to figure out how to calm the other

person down when they were furious. But, because they persevered, they finally found the best way to cool the flames in each other. It was simple—give them some space and time to breathe, before they went and helped their anger simmer down through kisses and cuddles. It worked every time...until one day, they found themselves being mad, no, *furious*, at each other. And without someone to help tame their tempers...well...let's just say that fighting fire with fire always ends up with someone getting burned...

He's doing it again. In their first year or so of being together, this happened all the time and she didn't bat an eye. It previously would've made her feel warm and cared for. But now, they've been together for three and a half years and she could've sworn they were past this stage.

"Mike, please stop talking like that." His explanation of their physics project halts and he looks up in confusion. "...like what?" "Like...like I'm a baby. I understand you just fine, you don't have to be gentle." "Oh...I'm sorry, I didn't even realize I was doing that...okay, thanks for telling me," he says with a smile. Five minutes later, it's slipped back into his voice and she's starting to lose a grip on her patience. "Mike!" she says more abruptly than she meant to. He looks at her in alarm. "What?!" "You're doing it again. Please stop," she tells him, her tone completely serious. He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry. But I'm just trying to help you, you know that, right?" "Yes...but you're talking like you'd talk to a little kid, not someone your own age," she tries to explain to him the best she can, her voice fighting to stay strong. He nods slowly. "That makes sense...okay, tell me if it happens again," he says with a smile that looks suspiciously forced to her.

By the time he starts talking again and she starts comprehending what he's saying, she realizes she's extremely confused, having not really paid attention for the past minute, as all her focus was on his tone. She interrupts him mid-sentence. "You know what, let's do this tomorrow, I can't focus," she says, already starting to pack up her things. Dang it, now she'll have to put off working on her project for another day, meaning she'll have to cram more in at the end, all because Mike couldn't control his stupid..."baby voice".

He reads her face like a book and scrambles to catch up with her,

sensing something brooding. "Hey, whoa, you're not actually mad about this, are you?" He says, placing himself in front of her so she stops walking. She purses her lips and looks down at the ground. "And if I am?" she says quietly, her eyes holding something he hasn't seen in a long time as she looks back up at him. "Well...well then we should resolve this," he tells her, clearly flustered.

It's a second nature at this point. Her mind trips over the unfamiliar word and she automatically repeats, "Resolve?" His voice softens, but more so than usual as he explains, "Make a problem better." It comes to her attention just how grated her nerves have become when a flash of anger rips through her at his tone of voice. "Mike, that is the third time today you've talked to me like that," and her stern voice catches him off guard. "Well, I'm sorry El, but...but it's...you know, it's what I'm used to."

That does it. That's the trigger that pulls the pin on the bomb hiding somewhere deep within her and the countdown begins as her anger flares up.

"Yeah, but after three years...THREE years, you didn't stop to think that I'd grown up a little? I'm not that scared little kid you found anymore!" she forcefully tells him, taking a step towards him. "I know, and I'm proud of you, I'm proud of how far you've come...but El, you do not know everything yet, and I'll always be here to help you." Even though she can see the frustration seep onto his face, she curses him and his kind words knowing how to calm her down. But she shoves those feelings aside, not wanting to calm down, the bomb still ticking relentlessly inside of her.

"You're treating me like I'm less than you. Like I can't understand you if you don't talk to me like I'm your little sister!" "Okay, okay!" His hands fly up defensively as she takes another step closer. "So that's something I could work on, I get it. But you have to be patient with me, it's habit, and I hope you can understand that it'll be hard to break!" "Fine, as long as you're less patient with me!"

That's...not how she meant to phrase that, she realizes the split second after the words are out of her mouth and she watches his features drop and his eyes flare up. "No." "What?" "No. No, I won't be less patient with you. I won't stop caring for you and helping you,

just because..." She knows where this sentence is going and she cuts him off. "That is NOT what I'm asking Mike! What I'm asking is that you open your eyes and see that I am not below you and I don't need your little baby voice!" "I get that El, I get your point. But you're not listening to me. I will try to stop that, but it's gonna be hard!" His hands clench around the straps of his backpack.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

"And you know why that is?" she asks, her voice dangerously low and her temper dangerously high. "Yeah, because that's how I helped you for three..." Her glare pins him and he stops, knowing where she's going with this. "So you're saying you've loathed the way I've explained things to you for who knows how long and you've never bothered to say anything?"

Tick. Tick. Tick.

"El, you have to learn to stick up for yourself! If I would've known, this would've stopped sooner!" "I figured you'd grow out of it, because you would've realized I'm your *girlfriend* and not a kindergartner!" she all but yells back. "But you still should've said something! This is how I've always interacted with you! So every time I've helped you, you've gotten annoyed? Every time I've tried to show you something new and help you explore the world, you've gotten frustrated? If you haven't appreciated what I've tried to do for you, I can live with that, but letting me play into...into a LIE?"

She's shaking. Tick. Tick. Tick.

"So then you've just been using me and for what? Just as a dictionary? Just for kisses when you feel like it? Just to help you get into school? For...for p-pity? Because I'm a nerd with no other friends ex-cept the Party?" He's trembling, his eyes turning red as he fights back tears and she angrily wipes away her own. But he's not done yet.

"Dammit El, I care about you so much and I thought you did too. Friends don't lie, El. And you? You've been lying. I'm sorry that I've hurt you. I'm sorry that you don't appreciate all I've done for you."

Tick.

"Mike."

"But if that's all you need, I'll just be on my way." And with that, his voice breaks and he turns away from her, headed towards the bike racks with his head hanging low and his hands gripping his straps.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

No. No, he can't just walk away. How dare he. She's furious, more so than she's been in a very, very long time. Without a second thought, her powers come to life and she grabs onto his receding form, hastily lifting him up a few inches above the ground and drags him back to her, the bomb on its last countdown.

:05

She's literally seeing red.

:04

He slowly turns around to face her and his face is a mask of pain and anger.

:03

He takes a step toward her and looks her dead in the eye. She crosses her arms.

:02

He takes a breath and she braces herself, standing defiantly, glaring at him, ready to fire back.

:01

"What is wrong with you?" he whispers.

He might as well have slapped her in the face.

The bomb defuses. All she's left with is an overwhelming numbness and a grief that stabs at her heart, as if someone had doused her fire

with water and replaced it with pain.

Oh no.

Oh no no no no no, he's leaving. He's getting on his bike and he's leaving her. He can't leave. He has to come back. Oh no no no, please come back.

She can't breathe, the tears are so thick. Her emotions are drowning, swallowing her up whole and she falls to her knees on the cement, shaking as she struggles to comprehend what had just happened.

What had she done?

'You didn't do anything. He's the one who made it a freaking big deal,' her thoughts reason and she begs herself to listen to them. With all her heart, she didn't want this to be her fault, but the awful, awful feeling in her gut told her it was. That *she* was the one not listening to *him*.

Not knowing what rationale to believe, she buries her head in her knees and cries and cries and cries.

He's gone. He's *gone*. He's gone and she doesn't know how to fix it. She doesn't know how this is going to get better. She doesn't know anything besides how badly she wishes the last ten minutes could be swept from her mind and she could redo the entire conversation. Because it hurts, it hurts so *much* and she just wants him back, but he probably hates her guts now and...oh no, what if he never speaks to her again? She's mad at him, yes, (furious even), but she hadn't meant to push him away...well maybe she did, he was being such a...such a...*knucklehead*. But maybe she was too? Ugh, she doesn't know, she doesn't freaking know and she just wants everything to slow down and rewind but it can't, and she *misses* him and...

"El? El! Oh my gosh, what happened?" she hears and she peeks out from behind her knees just for long enough to see Lucas jogging towards her. Her body tenses automatically when he kneels down beside her and she bites back a sob as he places his hand on her arm. He looks around worriedly before his eyes land back on her. "Where's Mike?" he asks and it breaks her.

Burying her face back behind her knees, she wills herself not to fall apart completely, but she's dangerously close as she sobs, knowing she sounds like her heart is being ripped out of chest, which is not far from the truth at all. An arm hesitantly wraps around her shoulders and through her cloud of despair, she finds a shred of appreciation for her friend, who definitely isn't world's biggest fan of physical contact.

He lets her cry it out, doing his best to calm her down by letting her lean against him and shyly rubbing her arm and when she finally, finally is reduced to shuddering gasps and occasional sniffles, he asks a question she doesn't want to answer. "Did he hurt you?"

Mike's final, heated words echo through her mind and her bottom lip quivers as she nods. As much as she hates admitting it, she knows he shouldn't take all of them blame. "And...and I h-hurt him too," she whispers, wiping at her eyes. She doesn't dare look at Lucas's face, knowing he's probably shocked.

Her and Mike have never fought. They've argued, but it never lasted for very long and it always ended with them apologizing profusely over and over. It's what they were known for—disagreements have never been able to split them apart and everyone knows it. But now...now that that reputation has been broken, she's lost. She's lost and helpless and she's scared. Her and Hopper have fought plenty of times, sure, but he's her guardian. They have to work it out between them no matter what, since they live together under the same roof and it's his job to provide for her. But Mike? Mike has no obligation to come back to her. She loves him immensely and she could've sworn he felt the same, but what if...what if this was so bad that he was having second thoughts about his feelings? What if he never speaks to her again? What if they never repair this? What if...

No. What if's aren't going to get her anywhere. She needs to breathe. She needs to...she needs to think, but her mind is still a mess and even breathing seems hard enough right now with how stuffed up she is from crying.

She'd kind of forgotten that Lucas is sitting beside her until he speaks again. "Do you want me to talk to him?" he asks her and her eyes go wide. She furiously shakes her head and he furrows his brow. "Do

you want to talk about it?" "No," she whispers. Eventually, yes, maybe he or someone else could help her figure out how to fix this, but it's too fresh, too sudden. "Well, what *can* I do, El?" he asks softly. "Take me home," she mumbles and he agrees without a second thought.

The bike ride back to the cabin is quiet as he pedals through town. Her thoughts have slowed down and she just feels *exhausted*, physically and emotionally. She doesn't want to think about what Hopper's gonna say, she doesn't want to think about how she has to see Mike on Monday, she doesn't want to think about how she's gonna get her project done, she doesn't want to *think*.

When they roll up to the cabin, Lucas turns to her as she climbs off the bike. "El, please let one of us know if you need help. You and Mike can't live without one another, and you know it." She merely nods, knowing he's right and hugs her friend goodbye, before dashing up the steps to the front door.

Unlocking it with her powers, she steps through and shuts it, heading straight to her room without a second glance at her dad. "I don't want to talk about it," she announces shakily before she slams her bedroom door and collapses onto her bed.

By some miracle, she manages to fall asleep within minutes of laying down, praying that when she wakes up, this will have all been one big, horrible dream.

The second his bedroom door closes, the wave of tears he'd been pushing back as he furiously pedaled home came crashing down and he collapses on his bed, burying his face in his pillow to muffle his sobs. He hasn't cried this hard in over a year and while he feels kind of dumb doing it, there are too many swirling emotions within him to do anything but.

He sobs out of frustration that things had gotten out of hand, out of the pain El's words had caused him and the emptiness he now felt because she probably would never want to see him again.

That's what hurts the most. The fear that this means things are over

between them. The logical side of him whispers that their relationship is strong enough that this can't be enough to break them, but right now he's *scared* and confused and it's all such a mess.

How had it gotten so bad so quickly?

He lets his tears naturally come to an end before he rolls into his back and stares up at his ceiling. His breaths come in short gasps, but at least his mind has somewhat cleared. Only to be replaced with images of her seething as she listens to him and the painful tone to her words. As much as it hurts, he forces himself to replay their argument, wanting to understand who exactly had started it and where he had started to lose his temper.

Because he knows he overreacted. With everything within him, he doesn't want to admit that, he doesn't want to be the one who has to apologize. But hearing her say that she had been hiding something from him, something important that he definitely wished he had known, made something inside him snap and his mouth ran off without his mind being able to catch it.

Still, if she had been understanding in the first place that it was going to take him some time to stop doing what she thought he was doing, none of this would've ever happened. And yes, it's second nature for his voice to soften a little bit when he's explaining something to her, so sue him. It wasn't ever his intention to treat her like a kid, he just didn't want his voice to sound condescending. And she'd never shown any signs of being annoyed before, so why was she just mentioning it now? Why on earth had she let it go on for so long? It pains him immensely to know he'd been (maybe?) buying into the lie that when she needed help, she'd been too busy being pissed off at the way he was supposedly talking and, consequently, at him, to actually listen.

With a frustrated growl, he punches his pillow at the thought of her faking it around him. He's never had a problem being able to read her, so he should've been able to pick up on it if something was...off when he explained something to her, right? Unless she was just really, really good at hiding it...

'I could ask her tomorrow,' he reasons with himself, before reality crashes in and he bites his lip as another tear runs down his temple,

his anger dissolving considerably. There's no way she'd want to talk to him tomorrow, let alone discuss the issue they'd just fought about. He'd hurt her, he knows he did, he knows he's not blameless. He knew it the second his final question was out of his mouth. What he wouldn't give to take that back, to calm himself down, to stop the rant that inevitably was the final blow in their fight. His stupid temper got the best of him and...ugh, it had never caused anything but hurt.

'Stupid, stupid, STUPID,' he chides himself, digging his nails into his palms and letting himself begin to cry again.

He misses her. He misses her *so much*. It can't just be over like this, he needs her so badly. Even though she wasn't completely faultless either, that didn't change how hard he'd fallen for her and how his heart absolutely belonged to her and her alone. Had she lost her patience with him way too quickly? Yes. Had she broken one of their most sacred rules? Also yes. Was he mad at her? ...yes. He didn't want to be. But he was.

Was he still undeniably in love with her? Yes.

They had to talk it out. He didn't want to face it, face her, but they had to. He had to. He couldn't let her go, not now, not ever. And there's no way this was going to be their first fight, so they might as well figure out how to solve them now, right?

But not tonight. Definitely not tonight. He needs to let the dust settle.

...maybe.

...or maybe he should talk to her. Maybe she's devastated and misses him as much as he misses her.

He rises to his feet and heads for the door.

...or maybe she's still boiling mad and he'd only make it worse. He knows how long it takes for her to calm down, he reasons as he plops back down on his bed.

...or maybe...maybe she thinks he hates her and is never gonna talk to her again and she'll spend the rest of her life avoiding him.

That does it. He strides across his room and throws open the door. Checking to make sure Nancy has indeed left for the weekend, he dashes across the hall into her room and is holding her baby blue phone in one hand, dialing the cabin's phone number before he can give his actions a second thought.

When it starts ringing, he only briefly wonders what the hell he's going to say to her, before the chief's gruff voice answers on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Hopper, it's...it's Mike." Wow, if Hopper can't tell that he's been crying, he had to be deaf. But he presses on, determined to get his girl on the line. "I was just wondering if-"

"Kid, I don't know what you did to her or, hell, what she did to you, but she's locked herself in her room and hasn't come out since she got home."

Of course she did. That's what she always does. He bites his tongue before he can tell Hopper how to coax her out (which he's accomplished many times) and instead says, "I...I just need to talk to her. Please. Can you at least go tell her I'm trying to reach her?" Over the phone, he hears Hopper sigh, then there's a clatter as the phone is left to dangle on the wall. He listens intently as he hears the chief say something, most likely talking to El through the door. Then, silence. More silence. There's a muffled "El?", before the sound of a door creaking open and he dares to hope, hope she'll be willing to come to the phone.

There's a few distant harsh words and his heart sinks when he realizes she's talking. And then a "Hey, watch it, young lady!" "Go away!" he hears her yell, followed by a door slam and he feels his face crumple. "Kid, she threw a book at me. I'm guessing that means no," Hopper tells him, sounding exasperated. "Thanks anyway," Mike manages to get out in as much of a level voice as he can handle, before he hangs up and runs back to his room.

Unbeknownst to the other, Mike and El both cry themselves to sleep that night.

The only reason El comes out of her room the next day is to hastily eat her meals, avoiding eye contact with Hopper and just generally moping about. She attempts to do the homework she's been assigned for the weekend, but she can't concentrate, her mind continuously wandering back to yesterday. When the afternoon rolls around, she realizes there's no use pretending she can focus and with a sigh, she pushes her papers to the side and lets herself fall back on her bed.

She hasn't felt this depressed since those days when she was locked up in the cabin. Her heart feels heavy, her body like it has no energy left. She can't even tell if it hurts anymore, everything is just so...dull.

She knows she should talk about it...process her feelings and come to a resolution as to how to move forward, but the only person she ever felt comfortable doing that with was the one who'd hurt her in the first place. Hopper is terrible at relationship advice and she really doesn't want their other friends to know what's going on...they'd bug the two of them incessantly about it and while she loved them to death, wow, could that get annoying.

Taking a deep breath, she closes her eyes and wills her thoughts to slow, wills her emotions to stop overlapping one another. It's a process, but eventually she gets to one question.

What happens now?

Not resolving this is not an option, she bitterly admits to herself, but there's no way in heck she's going to be the first to apologize. He's going to have to make the first move, because all she was trying to do was confront him about an issue. Sure, she'd been a little harsh, but that seemed so insignificant compared to how overdramatic he was being. For goodness sake's, she asked him to change something and all of a sudden, she's a liar and has been using him for her own selfish purposes. She was well aware of how quickly his anger could get out of hand, but wow, had he taken it way too far this time. If he'd actually meant the things he said...she doesn't know if she can handle that, she realizes as a lump begins to form in her throat. His words cut her deep, deeper than they probably should've.

Somewhere, deep inside her, a voice whispers, "you hurt him too,"

and she winces, thinking back to what she was accused of. It wasn't entirely true that she had been annoyed every time he explained something to her, in fact, quite the opposite. It was one of the things she adored about him, how he seemed to devote his entire attention to her as he taught her something new about the world in terms she would understand. Honestly, that wasn't the problem, the problem was his tone of voice.

It was similar to the one she'd heard him use with Holly and once she figured that out, wow, did it piss her off. Holly was seven. She was fifteen. And granted, if he was in a hurry, his explanation was short and sweet and *normal*, but when it's more complicated, like her project, it baffles her how he slips into treating her like she's too stupid to comprehend what he's saying unless he's extra gentle with her.

She knows he doesn't do it to hurt her. She knows he doesn't do it to make her feel inferior. So, for a while, she refused to let it annoy her, but it did and she let it go on for too long and now they're here and now...and now she just wants him back. Even if she has to put up with his little kid voice, he's still worth it. He'll always be worth it.

She mopes around for most of Saturday, keeping to herself in her room and trying her hardest to keep her thoughts from drifting to places she doesn't want to go. She's waiting, really. She's waiting for him to come to her and make this right. Sure, *she* could do it, but her own pride is holding her back, refusing to let her cave and take the higher road, whatever that means.

She drifts off to sleep absolutely miserable that night.

When the secret knock resonates through the cabin at way-too-early o'clock on Sunday morning, she blearily drags herself out of bed, assuming Hopper forgot something and came back to get it. Sleep still clouds her brain as she rubs her eyes, making her way over to the door and unlocking it half heartedly.

"What did you forget-"

Oh.

That's not Hopper.

It's Mike.

It's Mike and he looks like he hasn't slept well in years. Her first instinct is to throw herself into his arms, as is their usual greeting whenever they see each other, but when reality comes crashing down and she finally remembers that her heart is currently broken, she almost slams the door in his face as a thousand emotions flash through her body.

Instead, she stares numbly at him, her words failing her as she watches him work up the courage to say something. After what seems like forever, he takes a breath and straightens up. "We need to talk," he says firmly.

Reluctantly, she nods, fighting to keep her face neutral. "Two minutes," she mumbles before shutting the door softly to go get ready.

As she changes out of her pajamas and pulls on her clothes for today, her thoughts are quiet and empty, her body going on autopilot as she fights through each emotion that pops up. She won't deny how great it felt to see him again but what she wasn't expecting was how the sight of him *hurt*, for lack of a better term. The only word she can conjure up to describe it is prickly—her insides had prickled up and for the first time in a long time, she isn't sure she wants to talk to him. Without a doubt, she knows she has to, but that won't make the confrontation any less painful.

'This is *Mike*,' she has to keep reminding herself. 'Not some heartless boy I won't be able to reason with.' Exhaling slowly, she places her hand on the doorknob. 'I'm doing this because we have to work this out.' Her resolve hardens and she opens the door.

He's standing by the steps as she walks out and sends her a small smile that she pretends not to notice as she locks up the cabin. "Pond?" she asks in a flat tone and he nods, stuffing his hands in his pockets as they head off towards the small body of water near the cabin.

Their silence as their feet crunched along the leaves was thick with tension, something she'd never felt between them and she *hated* it. She hated that she wasn't holding his hand and she hated that he wasn't excitedly telling her about his weekend and she hated that she couldn't think of anything to say, but she bottles all that up and shoves it deep, deep down in an attempt to remain as stoic as she possibly can. Her pride refuses to let him see how much this had affected her and she gives into it, letting it seep into her resolve.

They meander toward the small wooden bench by the edge of the water once they arrive and they plop down on it, not once meeting the other's gaze. The air around them is pulsing with unspoken words, but she stays silent, fidgeting with her sleeve and ignoring the insistent racing of her heart.

He speaks first and she smugly mentally high fives herself for staying strong, only to immediately be ashamed of her prideful attitude.

"Can I ask you something?" he mumbles, his voice hoarse and it breaks her heart. Against her will, her eyes flit up to meet his as she nods, cursing his beautiful brown orbs for sending a jolt of warmth through her. "Have I really been annoying to you for the past three years?" he practically whispers.

With a sigh, she shakes her head. She knew that'd come back to bite her, she knew that would cut him deep. "Then why did you say it?" "I was angry, Mike," she says with enough force to make him raise his eyebrows, but her voice was shaking noticeably. "You haven't been annoying for long...but I'm tired of the voice I thought would've gone away by now." Out of the corner of her eye, she sees him nod as he stares forlornly at the ground. "I hear you, I want you to know that," he says after a beat of silence.

He hesitates after his statement and she catches it, knowing there's more to his words. "But?" she inquires. "But...but I can't believe you let it go on for so long, El." His tone says he's not accusing her, but his words do and she resists the urge to roll her eyes. "I can't believe it became a habit of yours," she says with not as much force as she would've liked.

She watches as his hands clench together and somewhere deep inside

her, the intense anger she felt yesterday stirs and she swallows, hard, as if trying to force it back down.

"Look, I know you're upset about that, El. I get it. And we're just going in circles at this point. But please, I just need you to understand that I am going to try my hardest to stop it, I really am, because I realize now that it hurts you," he tells her, placing his hand over hers.

She yanks her hand away, his touch softening her more than she would've liked. She hears what he's saying loud and clear and she appreciates it, she knows it's what he's been saying from the beginning. But something inside of her still doesn't feel right, something is still putting her on edge, making her keep her guard up and she feels like she's waiting for something, something to make this better, because what he just said certainly did not.

"El? Say something, please," he says, his voice trembling. "It has to stop," she whispers, the edge to her words still very much present. "It will, I promise you. You've pointed it out and I know now what I need to change. I'm still not happy that you didn't tell me, but at least you did now, right?"

He's trying to lighten the mood. He's trying to make this better. That's what she wants, right? So why is her throat starting to burn and the tension between them still suffocating her? Not knowing what else to do, she merely nods, blinking back the tears that have sprung out of nowhere. He goes silent after that, shuffling his feet as she tries desperately not to cry, because something is still very wrong, she just can't freaking figure out what it is.

"El?"

She doesn't dare look up at him.

"I'm...I'm really sorry for yelling at you and...and I didn't mean everything I said, so...I'm sorry."

That was it. That tore down the wall she had built and a sob is ripped from her chest as she feels every bit of tension she had held go flying out the window. Every confusing emotion, every ounce of pride,

every pinch of anger, it all dissipated like *that*, leaving in its place a relief that makes her feel lighter than she has since this all began. Without a second thought, she falls against him, burying her face in his shoulder and his arms are around her in an instant as her tears fall thick and fast.

"I'm s-sorry too Mike. I'm sorry for what I said too. I sh-should've listened to you the first time, I know you're trying," she manages to get out as she clutches onto his shirt and presses her forehead against his neck.

"And *I'm* sorry for overreacting," he admits as he holds her close and she can tell by his voice that he's crying too. "I was such a mouth breather." Her chuckle soon morphs into a sob as she nods her head. "I was too, Mike..."

There's a beat of silence as they both try to collect themselves, clinging to the other desperately, until Mike speaks up again.

"You're impossibly stubborn, El," he tells her quietly, affectionately. "But I love you. So much." She lifts her head to glance up at him as her heart leaps and is quick to wipe away the tears that spill over his lashes. "I love you too. Forgive me?" she timidly asks him, her words small and shaky. He nods his head and her lips curl up into a relieved smile as he murmurs, "Always," before pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Will you forgive me too? I said some really, really stupid things," he says earnestly. "Yes," she replies simply, raising a hand to cup his cheek.

He places his hand over hers and gently pulls it down so he can delicately kiss her fingers, his other arm still wrapped around her shoulders. "I missed you, you know...I missed you so much," he tells her, his eyes gleaming bright with a fresh batch of tears. "I know...I missed you too. And..." She looks down sheepishly. "I'm sorry I didn't want to talk to you when you called. This could've ended sooner."

Sure, she'd been so *angry* when he called, but she couldn't help but notice how much she just wanted to hear his voice. Had she let herself talk to him, they definitely could've been spared from an entire night of pain and agony that she wants to forget as soon as possible. She's kicking herself for turning his call down when he

nudges her.

"I think I like ending it this way better," he says with a smile, squeezing her shoulders and she can't help but agree, smiling at how nice it is to be in his arms again. Letting herself fall into his embrace, she sighs as he rests his chin on her head. "Let's never do this again," she mumbles and he chuckles. "I hope it never happens again, too. But...we aren't very good at controlling our tempers, are we?" She shakes her head in agreement with a smile, glad that they're able to acknowledge something that vulnerable between them without it feeling uncomfortable. Heck, she's just glad to have *him* back without things feeling weird and uncomfortable.

"Promise me something?" "Of course." "We'll always resolve our problems, no matter what." "Promise," he replies without hesitation. "And we'll resolve it right then and there, even if it takes us a while," he adds on and she agrees, knowing how badly the distance between the two of them had hurt, physically and emotionally. She snuggles farther into his chest, sighing contently as they soak in the presence of one another while listening to the water lap at the shore and feeling immensely relieved that they hadn't lost the other for good.

This certainly wasn't the couple's last intense fight, but it was the first and last one that separated them. Things weren't always easy between them, but when they did have a disagreement, they always, *always* made a point not to abandon each other and there was not one single instance where they didn't talk it out right then and there. And, at the root of every argument, every fight, there was one common theme between them all. They fought because they cared about one another and couldn't bear to let the other go. Because, as they would come to realize, that's what happens when you're completely, totally, irrevocably in love.

27. Blood

Day 1

Everything was going great. The Party was all together, laughing and harassing one another as they ran around the arcade beating high scores, consuming as much junk food as they could and convincing themselves that blowing a month's allowance on games was worth it.

And it was. It was Thanksgiving break and sophomore year had already hit the teens hard. So what better way to get rid of the mounting stress and assignments than spending an entire day at their home away from home? El even got to join them, smiling and encouraging her friends through their virtual battles and competitions, only letting go of Mike's hand when it was his turn to play a round or two.

Life was good...until a certain something decided to sneak up on the young telekinetic of the group.

She's standing when it happens, Mike's arm slung around her shoulder as they cheer Dustin on at the skee ball machine. One minute, she's smiling, watching the game excitedly and the next, her lower body feels like someone is repeatedly driving a very sharp knife into her insides. She whimpers instantly and her hand rests against her abdomen, wincing as it gets worst. Against her will, her body deflates a little and she curls into Mike for support, who looks down in alarm, taking in her pained expression.

"El, what's wrong?" "It hurts," she whispers. "What hurts?" She says nothing, only glances down to where her hand has started massaging. "It hurts..." he repeats, glancing at her hand in confusion...until it hits him and his cheeks immediately flush red. "Oh! Oh, that...um...okay, okay...do you, um, want to go sit down?" he stammers out, clearly still not entirely comfortable with the situation. Despite the pain growing worse with every passing second, she glances at Dustin, who's clearly in the zone and is using his friends' support as fuel, not wanting to throw off his groove. Mike seems to read her mind. "Don't worry about it, he isn't doing that good anyway," he says, poking fun at his friend who is now swearing profanely at the game, as if it's

responsible for letting the ball roll into the wrong hole. She manages a smile, before her face contorts back into a grimace and she nods her head, letting Mike lead her to one of the nearby tables.

He takes her hand as they plop down on the bench and finds himself having no idea what to say. It's not like this is his first rodeo—this month will mark the fourth time she's had to deal with her period, but each one has been different and he's just hoping that the things that have worked in the past will work again. They haven't been as extreme as he's heard they can be, but you never know...

As for El, she has the strange urge to cry as she realizes she has most likely ruined the day for not only Mike, but the rest of her friends as they start to notice they're down two members. When she hears Mike ask if she wants to go home, that breaks what little control she has and she lets go of his hands to curl up and bury her face behind her knees, letting her spontaneous tears fall softly.

She doesn't usually cry this easily, but something about being a burden today combined with Mike's concerned tone just gets to her and she can't help her reaction.

"Hey, hey, it's okay, El, everything's okay," he's in the middle of saying as he goes to wrap his arms around her and hold her tight. She sniffs as she apologizes over and over again for ruining today and he just shakes his head, gently stroking her arm to help calm her down.

By now, the Party has started to gather around her, shooting Mike questioning looks. He just shrugs helplessly and returns his attention to the sniffling girl beside him. "I'll take you home, okay?" he tells her quietly, knowing that she just needs to rest and take it easy for the next couple of days. It's going to be quite the roller coaster of emotions for her, but he's ready for it, ready to endure anything she throws at him.

"Okay," she mumbles, sniffling as she reluctantly lets him help her to her feet. "I'm sorry guys," she says quietly, addressing their friends as her bottom lip begins to tremble again. "No, El, it's fine, don't worry about it," Will reassures her as everyone else shakes their heads, giving her the peace of mind that she hadn't ruined the day. She gives them the tiniest smile as Mike takes her hand, mouthing a "Thank

you" to the rest of the party and leads her outside where his bike awaits.

Her hands have a tight grip on his jacket as he pedals towards the cabin and he winces every time she whimpers behind him, a result of what her body's going through. He's still a teenage boy, so the topic leaves him feeling a little squeamish but far overriding that is his concern for El and her comfort. To make it worse, there's virtually nothing he can do to stop it. He's not completely powerless and can do things to help her survive, but her pain is inevitable, something he hates.

She's slow to get off the bike when he finally pulls up to her home and he can see from her face that she really just needs to go sleep and be left alone for a while. He kisses her once to make her smile and when that one succeeds, he presses his lips to hers once again, more firmly this time, in an effort to give her comfort and reassurance that it was going to be okay. Her posture more relaxed than it has been all day, she pecks him on the cheek in farewell and saunters up the steps, disappearing into the cabin.

Day 2

She's quiet on Friday. She's always quiet, but she usually has this poise that shows she's alert and intrigued by the world around her. Today, however, her friends can barely hold her attention for long enough to at least get a weak smile out of her.

He's guessing she didn't sleep well last night, most likely kept awake because of cramps. And it must've gotten worse this morning—she's distant and her face scrunches up in pain more times than he'd like to admit. The day seems to drag on forever, every minute he has to watch her silently struggle makes it worse and since they share a grand total of one class together (World History has been made ten times better thanks to their desks being next to each other and everything), he can only check up on her during lunch and seventh period. But, he'll take what he can get and he quietly offers his support to her multiple times. It's not like she's dying or anything, he just knows that she'd rather be anywhere but somewhere public and having to focus is not ideal for her right now. Through the occasional glance, hand squeeze and a few subtly exchanged notes, she lets him

know she's okay and that she just needs to get through today.

They're going to see each other tomorrow anyways—Hopper was going to a conference in Indianapolis and had reluctantly agreed to drop El off at Mike's for the day. He's been looking forward to it all week and while their original plans were now skewed to accommodate her needs, he couldn't wait to spoil her and take care of her for an entire day. A small part of him wants to smother her in affection today, but he holds back, knowing they'll have plenty of time for that tomorrow.

When the school day finally ends, she hugs him for a long time before they part and he breathes her in, relishing the feeling of her in his arms after a day of stifled contact. "How're you feeling now?" he asks her when she steps back and his heart sinks when she shrugs. "Weird," she replies, her brow quirked in a way that shows him she isn't quite sure what she means by that either. "Like, good weird or bad weird?" he asks inquisitively, his hand absentmindedly fumbling for hers and skimming his thumb along her knuckles as she contemplates this. "Maybe not weird...just...different," she finally settles on and he nods. "You seemed like you were...far away today, if that makes sense." "I feel far away," she mumbles, glancing down at their feet. After a moment, however, she smiles and shakes her head, as if to ease the worry that's probably coming off him in waves. "But, it's probably just...this," she says lightheartedly, gesturing to the area around her stomach and he turns all shades of red, quickly diverting his eyes back up to hers. "Y-yeah, probably," he stammers, giving her a shy, reassuring smile in return.

A car horn startles them both and Mike whips his head around to see the chief's cruiser parked in the pick-up lane. "See you tomorrow?" he hears El say and there's no mistaking the hopeful, excited tone to her words. "Yeah, of course!" he replies, turning back to face her and her beaming smile. "Just come around back to the basement when you get there, okay? And it's okay if you aren't feeling good, we can just be lazy and watch movies all day if you want to," he tells her, grasping her hand as they start walking towards the parking lot. She smirks, replying, "We were gonna do that anyway," and he laughs. "You're right, I think I need to come up with more things for us to do." Shaking her head, she stops by the curb. "No, I like movies,

because then we can cuddle and you get to explain things to me," she tells him and his stomach flips. "Yeah...yeah, that too," he replies, knowing the grin on his face is probably sickly sweet, but he could care less.

He kisses her forehead tenderly, before letting her climb into the front seat of Hopper's truck. "See you tomorrow, Mike," she calls from the open window and he waves as they start to drive off.

"See you tomorrow, El."

Day 3

Everything was set. Blankets were piled up on his basement couch, stacks of VHS tapes were balancing on top of the TV, all the snacks they could ever want were scattered throughout the room, the fort has been expanded upon in case she wanted to go in there, he was ready. Today was going to be about her, whether she liked it or not.

He paces around the basement, glancing at the clock every two seconds as he awaits her arrival. He's positive he has everything she'd need, but he double checks anyway, wanting everything to be perfect. He can't empathize with her, but he sure is heck is good at sympathizing and that's what he intends to do.

A timid knock on the door jolts him out of his thoughts and he takes a breath, glancing around the room one last time. Satisfied, he opens the door and smiles when he sees her standing there, a drawstring bag thrown over her shoulder.

"Hi," he says and opens his arms to embrace her. Worry shoots across her face and she takes a step back, shaking her head frantically.

Um...okay?

"Are you okay?" The question is out of his mouth before he has time to think and it occurs to him that he should've at least invited her in first, helped her get comfortable, but something's not right and he's determined to find out what it is. Slowly, hesitantly, she shakes her head and glances down at the ground.

He sighs sympathetically and opens the door a little wider. "Do you

want to come in?" he asks, his voice a lot more tender now that he knows something is wrong. Mentally, he adds, 'so I can figure out how to help you,' as she crosses the threshold and stands there timidly. Shutting the door, he goes to take her hand almost subconsciously, but again, she moves her hand out of his reach, folding her arms in front of her body.

"What's wrong, El?" She doesn't meet his eyes and shuffles her feet as he waits patiently. "Everything hurts," she finally admits quietly. "And I feel gross and I look gross and I hate this."

"El..." he starts, wanting to hold her so badly, but she again flinches away. "No...no, don't touch me," she tells him, her voice barely above a whisper and it breaks his heart in two when he sees the hint of self-loathing that's creeping into her eyes. "What can I do to help you?" he asks in the softest tone he can. "I've got food, we can watch a movie, we can read something, whatever you want!" He hopes her face will light up at at least one of the options he presents, but she only swallows and keeps averting his gaze.

"I think..." she mumbles after a pause. "I think I just want to be alone." And with that, she turns and dashes up the stairs, shutting the door behind her.

Okay...that just happened.

He won't pretend like that didn't sting and he feels a frustration rising in him that he quickly suppresses. Her...condition doesn't mean everything she does is okay, but it gives her a little leeway. She's still figuring it out just as much as he is.

But he still is a clingy boyfriend (they just made it official a few weeks ago. One of the best days of his life) and she might want to be alone, and he respects that, but he's determined to help her one way or another.

He honors her request and shuffles around the basement for a little bit, wracking his brain for the best way to approach her. He assumes it's with Eggos, but he just wants to make sure he's not forgetting something, something that would turn her whole demeanor around that he just can't think of right now.

Nope, it's Eggos. They always work. The day they don't is the day the human race dies.

After waiting just a few more minutes, he makes his way to the kitchen, popping a couple of the waffles into the toaster and sitting on the counter, all the while glancing at the stairway just in case she decides to come down. He knows she's up in his room, it's the only other space in the house where she feels comfortable. He's thanking the heavens that he'd cleaned his room recently when the toaster clicks and the waffles spring up. Quickly putting them on a plate and decorating them with powdered sugar, he climbs the stairs to the upper level, being careful not to trip. He exhales when he reaches his closed door. 'Here goes nothing,' he thinks and raps softly on the wood. "El?"

Faintly, he hears her sigh, before she replies, "Yes?" Assuming that means he's allowed to enter, he opens the door slowly and peers into the room. She's curled up in his bed, laying on her stomach with the covers pulled up to her chin and he can't help but smile at how cute she looks.

"I brought you food," he tells her softly, chuckling when her hand shoots out from underneath his blanket. He hands her a waffle before setting the plate down and sitting down in front of the bed. She devours it in seconds, licking her lips to get the sugar off when she's done, looking content as she snuggles back under the covers. "Thank you," she murmurs, offering him a small smile, which he returns. She sighs and shuts her eyes lazily, the corners of her mouth still turned up in contentment.

He's glad her favorite food had made her happier, but he can't shake the feeling that he can do more. Besides, he still hasn't had actual physical contact with her yet today and he decides to give it one more shot, not wanting her to think that he's neglecting her.

Although he's hesitant at first, he still reaches out and goes to slip his fingers into her hair, but without even opening her eyes she mumbles, "No, it's greasy." "El, I don't care, it's-" Her eyes open then and her tone softens to something more apologetic and pleading. "Mike, please no." Sighing, he nods. She's self-conscious, he gets it, he supposes he wouldn't want her touching his hair if it was gross

beyond his control either.

His hand moves down to her back and he starts rubbing it gently through the blankets. Almost immediately, she relaxes and he secretly congratulates himself for finally finding a way to help her. "Is this okay?" he asks, just to make sure and he blows out a breath in relief when she nods.

He loses track of how long he kneels beside the bed, but he could care less, continuing to trace gentle patterns along her back as he watches her slowly sink into slumber. The peaceful look on her face makes his heart squeeze and his eyes dance along her pretty features, taking her in as his hand on her back lulls her to sleep.

His arm will eventually get tired and, as much as he hates to, he takes a break when he's absolutely positive she's completely asleep. He'll sit dutifully by her bedside, scribbling out an essay until she awakes with a yawn. She'll try to get up, but he insists she stays in bed where she's comfortable and she'll comply with a playful roll of her eyes when he bashfully admits he wants to take care of her. He entertains her for the rest of the day by teaching her the concepts in his homework and telling her stories that make her giggle. All the while, he'll constantly be checking up on her, feeding her whatever she wants and scrambling to find a pain medication when her cramps return with a vengeance.

He's sad when Hopper finally comes back that evening, but his heart soars when she lets him kiss her goodbye. She thanks him for getting her through the day and he quickly replies by telling her he'd be more than willing to do that every day of the year if he had to. With a final squeeze of her hand, he bids her goodnight and smiles as he watches her drive off with Hopper into the night.

Day 4

He's thrilled when he finds her jacket in his room the next day. Maybe "thrilled" was a bit of an overreaction, but this means he gets to see her again today, check up on how she's doing, make sure she's not miserable.

After reassuring his mom for the millionth time that he'd finished all

his homework for the weekend yesterday, he phones the cabin, knowing Hopper hates it when he shows up unannounced.

Needless to say, the chief is not ecstatic to be hearing his voice at seven on a Sunday morning and it takes a great deal of earnest pleading to convince him that his daughter had indeed left her jacket at the Wheeler house yesterday and that his only intention was to return it and leave.

That is, if El lets him leave so soon. But that sentiment goes unspoken between them and with a rough exhale, Hopper begrudgingly gives him an all day pass to the cabin and Mike almost (*almost*) flat out squeals when he hears the news.

He's never ridden to the cabin so fast. The autumn wind bites viciously at his cheeks and his fingers feel like they're about to fall off, but none of that matters, because something had occurred to him as he pedaled towards the woods. Hopper only rarely lets him be at the cabin all day and it's either when a) he'll be there all day to supervise them or b) El really, really needs him.

He chooses to ignore the first one and his heart races at the thought of it being the second reason. Day four never is painful for her, so he's not too worried about her wellbeing, which means that she's probably been begging her adoptive dad to let him come over. Whatever her needs, she wants him there and that alone makes him pedal even faster as his smile grows.

He races up the steps when he finally arrives, ditching his bike under the porch and pauses to catch his breath when he realizes he's panting. It takes a few seconds to pull his composure together, but when he's finally presentable, he raises his fist to knock on the door...

Only for it to swing wide open as soon as his hand gets close.

His girl stands in the entryway, still clad in her pajamas, but she looks much more resilient than yesterday, as he hoped she would. She's smiling, actually smiling and before he can get a word out, she closes the space between them, throwing herself into his arms.

"Hey El," he chuckles as she buries her face in his chest and sighs

happily. "Hello," she replies brightly, nestling farther into his embrace. They stay there like that for a while, his body protecting her from the chill of the morning air as they soak in this moment. This is what he had so dearly missed yesterday.

As if she had heard his thoughts, she pulls back and sheepishly meets his eye. "I'm sorry I was...um..." She can't find the word for how she was acting and frankly, he doesn't blame her because he can't either. Instead, he nods in understanding when she falls silent, causing her to smile up at him in relief and she leans in to peck his cheek before murmuring. "Can I make it up to you today?"

He's pretty sure his heart explodes when her cheeks go pink and she glances at him shyly. Speechless, he nods enthusiastically, more than willing to spend the day by her side, both literally and figuratively.

He only has half a mind to ask "Where's Hopper?" as he follows El into the cabin. "Hi kid," he hears a deep voice respond and he flinches, his eyes whipping to the kitchen table, where the chief sits casually, a stack of paperwork spread out before him.

Mike's heart sinks. He's not...he's not going to be here all day is he? How is he supposed to cuddle the heck out of his girlfriend with the chief of police staring him down? His intentions with her are completely innocent and he's proven himself to Hopper before, so why has he suddenly decided he needs to supervise their day?

El also must be thinking the same thing, because a quick glance at her shows she's engaged in a silent glaring standoff with him. She tugs Mike closer to her side, lifting her chin defiantly and Hopper finally cracks. "Relax, I already put the TV in your room. You two can spend the day in there—" They're already halfway across the living room when he holds up his hand. "IF..." he declares and they pause, tightening their grip on each other's hand and turning back towards him. "If the door remains open and you come out every once and awhile so I know you haven't run off through the window. Clear?"

"Yes sir," Mike mumbles and El just beams at him. "Thank you!" she tells him and with that, she tugs him into her room.

"You're cold," is the first thing she says when they cross the threshold

and she closes the door just enough so that there's a sliver between her room and the rest of the cabin. He shrugs as he kicks off his shoes. "It's not that bad, really," he tells her, watching as she walks to her bed and pulls back the covers. He sees her go to say something else, worry for him creasing her brow, but right now isn't about him. "How are you feeling today?" he asks before she can speak, happy to see that her demeanor has at least lightened up. "Better now that you're here," she replies with a soft smile that melts his heart.

He watches as she climbs into her bed, scooting over to make room for him and he doesn't hesitate when she pats the mattress beside her. After placing her jacket on her dresser, he happily slides under the covers and when he turns on his side to face her, she instantly presses herself closer to him, throwing an arm around his waist and her forehead rests against his chest. Eager to hold her, he wraps his arm around her shoulders, drawing her closer and slides his other hand under the pillow.

They're silent for a little while, blissfully content as they let their thoughts slow and their hearts swell with the presence of one another. Her small fingers on his back draw tiny circles along his jacket and he takes this opportunity to play with her curls like he couldn't yesterday. From what he can see of her face, she looks calm, restful, more than she has been the past few days and it's a relief to see her slowly turning back to normal. He feels so complete, being this close to her and he hates that they can't just do this forever. But he'll gladly take whatever he can get, storing this peaceful moment away for when life spirals out of control.

Eventually, she raises her head and quietly asks if he wants to watch something, to which he assures her that he'll do whatever she wants to, causing her to smile lovingly at him. Without a word, she telekinetically grabs the remote from on top of the television and they rearrange themselves so they can both see the screen, El curled up to Mike's side, her head under his chin as he envelopes her in his arms, the covers still draped across their legs.

She gasps when she stumbles upon a channel playing Grease and while it's not Mike's favorite movie, it could be worse and he's more than happy to listen to her hum along to the songs (which she's known for a few months, thanks to Max) as she follows the plot with

interest.

The rest of the day consists of mostly that—flipping through channels, finding something that sparks their interest, giving them an excuse to stay cuddled up to one another and when they can't find anything good, they talk about whatever comes to mind, murmuring secrets back and forth as they laze about.

When they started to get hungry, they meandered into the kitchen to find something for lunch, which consisted of Mike finding a couple boxes of Mac and cheese in the cupboards and attempting to cook it with El basically koala-bearing him. Two burnt fingers, several profuse apologies and a countless amount of reassurances later, they found themselves seated facing each other on her bed, Mike's hand now wrapped excessively in a bandage.

"I'm really sorry," she says for the thousandth time and he shakes his head to reassure her as she continues. "I just feel like I always need to be close to you today, it's weird." "It's fine El, really. It's probably your hormones acting up, I understand," he tells her gently, taking it as an accomplishment when he's able to say 'hormones' without blushing.

"Not that I don't always want to be close to you," she adds, smiling up at him, "but today is just...more." "At least I know what to expect for when this happens again," he tells her and is alarmed when her eyes go wide and she stops mid-chew. "El?" She swallows her bite before quietly saying, "I forgot this happens every month," and he nods.

Her cycles before this have never played with her emotions as much as they did this time around, so it was certainly an experience for both teens involved. "What if it just gets worse from here?" she asks in a very tiny voice, suddenly looking very worried for what's to come. He just shrugs and tenderly takes her hand. "Then we'll go through it together." She smiles when his eyes tell her he means it.

And he does. He's completely willing to brave whatever she might throw at him when her body goes through something that's completely natural every month. Besides, it wasn't all that bad and he loves her so much that even if her emotions were always all over the place, he would never stop being hers and hers alone, he concludes as

she pushes aside their dishes and reaches for him, asking for his arms to comfort and protect her once more.

28. Night Terrors

A/N: Happy Stranger Things Day!

This one shot is based off of my own personal experience with seeing things at night, which would explain how seemingly random it is. A challenge that came with writing this was, there's no fancy word for what my brain does at night because I can't find anyone else who's ever had these scenarios happen to them. I call them night terrors, because it's the closest thing I could find to what was happening to me, but as you'll see, the definition of those doesn't quite line up with what I had Mike go through. If you have any questions about this, feel free to PM me, otherwise, enjoy and, again, happy 35 years since Will Byers went missing!

It started with his mind making up stories.

He'd be fast asleep, laying sprawled out in his bed when his eyes would suddenly open for no obvious reason. Disoriented and glazed over from sleep, his thoughts would whirl to life and feed him the craziest scenarios, prompting him to get up and do something about the situation he had somehow found himself in.

"Someone's at your door, you need to go let them in," his mind said one time, so he would fumble groggily across his room and reach for the doorknob, only to find there was no one on the other side, only the shadow-ridden hallway illuminated by the nightlight they kept plugged into the wall for Holly. Sighing, he'd realize that it was just his brain playing tricks on him and shut the door quietly before falling back onto his bed.

Sometimes they were scary and hit too close to home. There was one night where his mind told him there was a bomb underneath their house and he needed to get out, grab everything he loved and run, get out, get out, get out. In his panicked state, he grabbed a pair of clothes and his SuperComm, dashing out his bedroom door and was about to command his family to save themselves, when he jarringly came to his senses, his heart still racing incessantly. Another time, there was supposedly a burglar trying to get into their house through

the downstairs window. That was the only time he'd actually made it down the stairs, a pocket knife in his hand, ready to defend his family from the intruder that didn't exist.

They were more annoying than anything, especially when his mind moved the threats from outside his room to inside where he was most vulnerable. That was when he began to see things. In the dim light filtering under his door from the hallway, the shapes in his room became people, monsters, aliens, bugs, objects.

Sometimes they scared him, sometimes they didn't. Sometimes his mind would realize that the basket of laundry sitting in the middle of his room wasn't a dead body and others he had to get up and touch it just to make sure. The faded light turned into swarms of bugs sometimes that he'd swat at, only to feel embarrassed when there was nothing there, glad that no one was there to witness these. His lamp became a skull, put there by some murderer out to get him, the few stuffed animals he had at the foot of his bed held life, or they did before he touched them and was convinced he had killed them when he found they were limp and inanimate, his Star Wars figurines morphed into a four-headed monster poised to attack, the list goes on and on.

And every time an...episode (he still didn't know what to call them) happened, he was exhausted the next morning because of it, his disrupted sleep cycle wearing him down.

Telling his friends was a lot harder than he thought it was going to be. Saying what was happening in his mind at night sounded so...weird when he said it out loud. They were supportive, of course, and didn't deem him insane, but he saw the confused, sympathetic looks on their faces as he struggled to find the right words for what his mind does to him.

"So...like a night terror?" Max says once he finishes attempting to explain this to them. "A what?" "A night terror, I used to have them as a kid. I would wake up afraid of something and my mom would have to come in and sit with me until I fell back asleep. I never remembered them though and it's weird that you remember yours." "Did you ever see anything in your room?" he asks inquisitively. "No, I never knew they happened until the next morning, remember? I

don't actually know what caused them..."

His shoulders slump, disappointed that he still didn't have an answer for what was happening to him. His friends launch off into a discussion about the weird dreams they've had before and the few instances where they'd sleepwalked, but Mike keeps his walls down, not feeling up to putting a smile on his face just yet.

A warm, soft hand covers his under the table and he doesn't hesitate before gently lacing their fingers together. El moves subtly to get closer to him, her leg pressing against his and her thumb traces patterns along his skin, effectively silencing his racing thoughts and he reads her message loud and clear. He's not alone, nor does he have to be. With a heavy exhale, he squeezes her hand affectionately and she reciprocates, making his concerns melt away for another day.

To his alarm, his 'night terrors' begin to occur more frequently, to the point where he would see something almost every night. He has yet to tell his parents, knowing they'd probably force him to see a therapist or something. And besides, his struggles weren't affecting them, so why bother trying to explain something to them that they couldn't help with.

He figured that the familiarity of his room and the layout of it played a role in his nightly episodes, assuming his brain just latched onto objects it recognized. But that theory is quickly proven wrong when the Party sleeps over at his house one quiet Friday night. He'd been hoping the change of scenery would give him respite for a night and he'd finally get the full eight hours of rest he'd been needing, but that wish was shattered about an hour after everyone fell asleep.

He awakes with a jolt, the darkness of the basement clouding his vision until his gaze suddenly lands on the shadowy figure standing next to El's fort.

Bad man. Holy crap.

He thrashes in his sleeping bag until he's free from its confines and dashes for the light switch, flicking it on in a panic to catch their intruder red handed and ready to defend El with his life.

Only...only it was just the coat hanger in the corner and now his friends are groaning, protesting the sudden light in their eyes. His heart still pounds frantically, but it sinks as he realizes what his mind had just tricked him into believing. Apologies spill out of him, ashamed that he'd panicked over nothing and interrupted his friends' slumber in the process. They blearily mumble that it's okay, concern starting to crease their features.

"Night terror?" Dustin asks and he nods half heartedly, continuing to apologize for waking them up. Finally, it's Will who interrupts his regretful rambling. "Are you okay?" he asks and Mike stops abruptly. Nodding, he sighs and tells them, "I'm so sorry, you guys can go back to sleep," before going to flick the light off.

"Mike." He glances up to find El's head poking out of her fort and her eyes trained on him, worry swirling around her beautiful orbs. She pats the space next to her and he manages a half smile before he switches off the light. Making his way over to the fort with his mind still disoriented in the sudden darkness proves to be a challenge, but he survives and kneels down in front of her when he gets there.

"I'm okay El, you can go back to sleep," he whispers quietly, but to his dismay, she doesn't budge an inch. Her hands reach out, searching for his with only the moonlight to guide her and she grasps onto his wrists when she finds them. "Come here," she whispers back, tugging on his arms slightly.

It surprises him when he find himself resistant to her command. She's trying to help him, comfort him, calm him down, but he still hates that he woke her up in the first place, furious at his mind for seeing such stupid things and even more so that he doesn't know how to stop it. He doesn't deserve comfort, who is he kidding?

As he continues to resist her plea, she suddenly sighs and he hears her scoot forward, stopping when their knees touch. He jumps when her hands come to cup his cheeks, but his insides grow warm when she gently plants a kiss on the tip of his nose, then on his cheekbone, continuing a trail of tiny kisses until the corners of his mouth finally crinkle up.

"Mike," she says again, this time a little more playful, but the

question is still embedded within his name and he doesn't hesitate before letting her pull him back into the fort. She pulls the blanket down over the entrance behind them, shielding them from the world as they arrange themselves under the pillows and blankets of the fort that holds memories they'll remember forever.

She lays down on her back, reaching for him and he curls up in her arms, resting his head against her shoulder, his forehead gracing the crook of her neck as he wraps an arm around her waist.

"I really am sorry, El," he mumbles, the decision to speak subconscious as he seeks affirmation that she isn't mad at him. He feels her shake her head and the arm draped across his shoulders squeezes him affectionately. "Don't be, I understand. You didn't do anything wrong," she murmurs in his ear and he sighs, melting further into her. The image of a man standing over the one he loves still hasn't fully vanished from his mind, but it's darn close as she holds him tighter still and continues to whisper comforting things to him, lulling him back into the delicate slumber he resides in until morning.

It still doesn't get better. His friends offer all the support they can, but it was hard to fight a force they didn't even understand. Having witnessed one themselves, they offered all the sympathy they could, knowing now how uncontrollable his reactions to them were and how visceral the experience was for him, at least. But as time went on and they kept occurring, they eventually figured that if they turned them into a joke, something to laugh at, it made Mike's load a lot easier to bear.

It was ridiculous, really, that he kept seeing the most random things in the most random places and they chose to acknowledge *that* rather than the sleep he was losing. "Guys, there was a dog in my room last night," he would tell them with a smile on his face and they'd chuckle, beginning to make up stories about how it got there and what it wanted from him. He'd laugh along with them, enjoying the humor they brought to these nightly occurrences that were annoying him to no end.

But suddenly, one night, the laughter stopped. The harmless nature of his episodes faded and instead, something new visited him within the

darkness of his room. Something horrible. Something wicked...

His stomach is clenched and his heart is in his throat before he even opens his eyes. There's nothing new lurking in the shadows of his room when his eyes flash open, but the air feels heavy, heavier than he's ever felt it. There is a presence here, one that he's never felt before, but it's unexplainably, undeniably evil. He can almost reach out and touch it, but he doesn't dare to, because all he knows is he has to run. He has to get out of there, because...because...

Demon.

It's a demon, it has to be and his brain goes into overdrive, fighting against the fog of sleep to get him out of the room as fast as possible. Because this thing is here to hurt him, possess him, attack him and he feels incredibly vulnerable and helpless, helpless and small, powerless to the force he doesn't understand. He can't breathe as he bolts for the door, throwing it open and running as fast as he can, feet pressing into the carpet, hands gripping for the handrails as he sprints for his parents' room. Surely, if he gets there in time, it can't follow him, it'll stay in his room, trapped behind the wood of his door.

But no, a door could not hold it in and he screams as a figure emerges from his parents' bedroom.

It got out. It got out and raced ahead of him, manifesting itself into this body and when it grabs his wrists, he fights it with everything he can. It can't win, it can't win, he refuses to let it win.

As he thrashes to get out of the monster's hold, he loses his balance and the next thing he knows, he's on his back and the demon-infested body pins him to the floor. Adrenaline, fear, panic, it rises in him like a tsunami, but all he knows to do is to fight. He kicks and screams and jerks every which way, begging the spirit to let him go, to let him live.

It's saying something to him. Over his own cries of terror, he can hear it speaking words, but he's too occupied trying to escape it to comprehend what's being said to him. He continues to struggle helplessly, his voice scratchy and hoarse from his screaming until finally, something breaks through the nightmare he's found himself

in.

"Mike!"

It's his mom's voice, pleading desperately for him to stop and as if someone had pulled the veil from his eyes, the illusion disappears.

He pants desperately, staring up at, not a demon-possessed human, but his mom, fear in her eyes as she holds his wrists down on the carpet. He flinches when a light from a room suddenly flickers on, followed by the soft crying of a child. Twisting his head on the carpet, he sees Holly standing in her doorway clutching a teddy bear, whimpering as she looks from him to their mom and Mike feels so...so...guilty.

There wasn't a demon in his room. Or in the body pinning him down. This was his house and this was his mom, restraining her mentally tormented son, just trying to wake him up, but he'd lashed out at her instead and he winces when he catches the sight of where her legs are starting to turn red, the after effects of him kicking her violently.

Slowly, he feels the grip on his wrists begin to loosen and he sits up gingerly, feeling shaky and jittery from the adrenaline coursing through his body. He's still disoriented, but he's awake enough to register the tears staining his mom's face as she tries to calm him and Holly down at the same time.

What has he done?

His mom succeeds in shooing Holly back to bed and he can feel her rubbing his back, murmuring words to him, but his mind is still far, far away, a jumbled mess as he tries to stay afloat against the confusion, shame and fear that's trying to drown him.

Sleep. He needs sleep. They'll figure this out later, but for right now, he just wants to escape his actions. Numbly, he rises to his feet, his mom following suit. He dares to look into her eyes and what he sees stabs at his chest. She's terrified, but she's immensely concerned and he looks away because he doesn't want her to be worried for him. He's broken, anguished and she can't fix him.

They shuffle back to his room, the space a lot less heavy with the absence of the hallucination his mind has conjured up for him. He mumbles a "Sorry..." to his mom, before she lets him go and shuts the door behind him. He collapses on his bed, shutting his eyes and attempting to will himself back to sleep, but it stays just out of his reach. He tosses and turns all night, his night terror flashing before his eyes every time he gets close to drifting off.

"Michael, do you know what you did last night?"

He grimaces as he settles down in a chair at their kitchen table the next morning, knowing this conversation was coming but dreading it all the same.

"Yeah, I do," he mumbles, stuffing his hands into his pockets and avoiding her gaze. For a while, his mom surprisingly doesn't say a thing, she just absentmindedly continues to cook the bacon and eggs that are simmering on the stove and the silence is making it worse.

He knows he can't control what he does in the night, but he's still kicking himself for letting the obviously-not-real apparition trick him into believing it was. He's had these so many times that he should be able to separate a trick from reality, but his mind is weak and he hates it, hates the naivety it holds. That hatred has been growing steadily as these episodes continued but now...now he's just feels like a worthless piece of crap since he ended up hurting half his family as well.

"So. Should we talk about it?" he hears his mom say and he lifts his head to see her placing his breakfast in front of him. She grabs her coffee mug and takes a seat at the table as well, watching him intently. She's not mad, he can tell. Her voice says she's more confused than anything and he shrugs, pushing his eggs around with a fork. "I really am sorry," he mumbles after a while. "I...I didn't mean to hurt you."

He's starting to feel extremely uncomfortable, wishing she'd just chide him already for losing control of his actions or something like that. Instead, she just says, "Can you tell me what happened? Maybe what was going on in your mind?" He sighs and nods, reluctantly relaying

a shortened version of last night's events to her through his perspective. He sees her eyebrows raise when he admits he thought there was a demon, but they raise even further when he finishes his story and tells her that these have happened before. When she asks why he never told her about these, he just shrugs, saying, "I never had a reason to."

A glance at the clock shows it's time for him to go, but his mom makes him promise that they'll talk about this more after school, a promise that he doesn't mind keeping because he knows he needs help. It was getting to be too much and what happened last night absolutely, positively cannot happen again and he'll take all the support he can get, though he still can't stand having to be in this vulnerable position in the first place.

His mind is relatively blank as he bikes to school that day, his only thoughts ones of self-hatred and occasional flashbacks to the darkness of his night terror, but he dismisses them immediately. He refuses to dwell on what had happened, it's only making things worse. The one thing he does contemplate, however, is how the heck he's going to tell his friends about this and how they would react. Would they pity him? Brush it off? Or worse...would they fear him?

He locks up his bike in a haze, already dreading every moment of today and makes his way inside, heading to the science hallway where most of their lockers are. They have a routine of gathering in front of the locker that belongs to whoever showed up first and it looks like today it was Dustin. The whole party has already assembled because of course he's the last one to show up that day.

They all greet him when he walks up to his friends and he plasters on the best fake smile he can as El moves to stand beside him, pecking his cheek to say hello. He reaches down and squeezes her hand in response, breathing in the lively atmosphere of his friends as he feels his body start to relax. Everything is going fine, until Max pipes up.

"Mike, no offense, but you look like death."

Dang it. His face falls and he looks down at the ground, shuffling his feet and he feels El tighten her grip on their joined hands. "What's up, man?" he hears Lucas ask when he doesn't say anything. "I had

another night terror," he says eventually. "And...it was the worst one." "Ever?" El's small voice comes from beside him and he nods. "Ever."

The mood drops significantly and no one speaks after that, letting this sink in. But the silence is different than the one his mom had fell into, because with them, he knows they care and they understand more than she ever could. He's chewing on his lip nervously without even realizing it when Will finally says something. "How bad was it?" he asks quietly and they all look at him expectantly. "Bad. I...I accidentally hurt my mom. I thought she was...something else. So I started kicking her..." The rest of his sentence gets clogged in his throat so he doesn't bother going any further.

'This is it,' he thinks to himself. 'This is when they realize I'm dangerous now. This was a mistake, I should've never told them...'

"Wow...that really, really sucks, Mike," Dustin says and he feels his mouth quirk up into a humorless smirk. "Yeah, it does," he agrees. A few seconds tick by before Dustin speaks up again. "I really don't know what else to say," and they all nod in agreement, giving him looks of sympathy that make him feel just a little bit better, because he doesn't really know what else to say, either. "But hey," Dustin continues, "You're still our Paladin!"

That gets a real smile out of him as his friend pats him on the back and the tension defuses as they all chime in with their agreement. "Yeah Wheeler, this doesn't change anything, you're still a part of the party," Lucas tells him with a smile and Mike chuckles. "Thanks guys, that means a lot," he says as the mood lightens and he's ready to move onto another topic when he feels a tug on his hand. He looks over at El, who begins running her thumb over his skin, a small smile on her face. "We're not afraid of you, Mike," she says tenderly and he can see his other friends nod enthusiastically, but he's too busy staring at her in both bewilderment and complete adoration.

How the heck did she know he had worried about that since he woke up this morning?

Distantly, the first period bell rings and the hallway spurs into motion around them as students race to their class, but he's too busy falling farther and farther in her soft brown eyes, the understanding

and comfort he finds in them making his heart feel like it's going to burst. The rest of their friends have said their goodbyes and headed off to class, but he can't resist letting his forehead come to rest against hers. Without any hesitation, her lips swoop up and they're suddenly on his, the pressure and overwhelming softness of them erasing every thought in his brain. Her hands weave into his hair and she pulls him closer, taking the lead and he can feel her pouring out her reassurance to him as he kisses her back gently. He smiles against her lips and she pecks him one more time for good measure before pulling back. Her cheeks are an adorable shade of pink and oh what he wouldn't give to ditch his first class and kiss her senseless for as long as he can get away with. But he knows Hopper would kill him, so he sighs and plants a final kiss on her forehead. "Love you," he murmurs against her skin. "Love you too," she responds before her smile fades and she looks up at him with a serious look in her eyes. "Promise me you'll come get me if you need me," she says firmly, to which he nods. "Promise." With one last kiss on her cheek, they part ways and she waves to him as he heads to Chemistry.

He already misses her, but the warmth in his chest is glowing brightly and he thanks whatever higher power is out there for his wonderful girlfriend for the billionth time.

But the second he steps out of her presence, the memories from last night quietly begin to tiptoe back into the forefront of his mind and he quickly drowns it in thoughts of El instead.

He can fight this. He's got this, it's going to be okay.

First period went by relatively uneventfully, his lips still buzzing from her kiss and his mind successfully distracted by the chemistry equation they were tackling that day. He threw himself headfirst into the problems, punching variables into his calculator and writing out his steps with ease, the methodology and familiarity of numbers helping to quiet his racing thoughts.

But that all falls to pieces once he gets to English. He tries hardest to focus on what their teacher is explaining, but without anything for him to study or work on, his mind drifts to the one place he doesn't want to go. He can feel it rising up, crouching in the back of his thoughts, his gut clenching as he fights, pushing against the memory

as hard as he can in an attempt to get it back into the cage where it belongs, but it's unleashed anyway, his control collapsing in an instant.

One second, he's listening to the teacher drone on about their next essay, and the next, all he can hear are his screams, the broken ones that were torn from his chest as he fled from an evil that didn't exist. They fill his ears and he's scared, scared because he knows what comes next, knows how it must've looked like from a perspective that wasn't clouded by hallucination. In his mind's eye, he imagines his panicked form as he struggles against his own mother's hold, stretching his legs out to kick, trying to escape and he can hear her pleads for him to stop and suddenly, Holly's crying because he won't stop screaming and pretty soon his mother's crying and he...he hurt them, he hurt them beyond his control and and and...

"Mike." Will's voice manages to break through his haze and his head snaps up to meet his best friend's worried gaze. It finally registered how hard he was breathing and how badly his hands were shaking, the adrenaline rushing through his body causing his heart to race frantically. Will examines him closely before his hand shoots up confidently. "Will, yes, you have a question?" Mrs. Hartman says, to which he replies, "Can Mike and I go work in the hallway?" She looks slightly taken aback, but Mike exhales in relief when she agrees with a warning to stay where she can see them and to get their draft done by tomorrow. Swearing that they'll work on it diligently, Will hurriedly packs up both his and Mike's things while Mike just stares at him blankly.

"Come on," he whispers under his breath, handing Mike's backpack to him as they make their way out of the classroom. He'd find it funny when he realizes that they're neither going to work on their essay nor stay anywhere near where Mrs. Hartman can see them if he wasn't still reeling from what had just happened.

He numbly follows Will to the AV room, shuffling his feet as he swiftly unlocks it with the key the four of them are allowed to carry around. "Why are we here?" he asks quietly, hopping up on the desk while Will locks up the door behind him. Will sighs as he crosses the room and takes a seat across from his friend. "Do you want to talk about it?" he offers, concern evident in his voice and Mike drops his

gaze. "I know you were thinking about last night in there," he adds on when he remains silent.

He knows he should talk about it, get it out, separate fantasy from reality. And he trusts Will to listen to him and help him process what he went through...he just is very, very scared that he's going to be afraid of him after this.

He realizes he still hasn't said a word when Will says his name. "Sorry, this is just...a lot," he replies immediately and his friend nods in understanding. But, despite having Will's reassurance, he still can't quite bring himself to just tell him what happened. Maybe he was scared of his reaction, maybe he didn't know how to put all of it into words, he didn't really know. But there was still something there, something holding him back no matter how hard he tried to power through it and just say what he needs to say.

"Just start at the beginning, Mike," he hears Will urge him gently. With a shuddering exhale, Mike begins with the first thing he remembers.

"There was something...evil in my room. I don't even remember what it looked like..." "Was it the Mind Flayer?" He shrugs. "I don't know...it was something more...supernatural. And all I knew was it wanted to hurt me..."

From there, his words spill out of him in a choppy, convoluted manner as he attempts to put the horrors of last night into a somewhat comprehensible story. He doesn't tell him everything and purposefully leaves some details out, but by the time he's finished, Will looks like he's gotten the gist of it.

He doesn't say anything once he's finished, only staring at him sympathetically and Mike can see him trying to process everything he just heard. Just when he's starting to regret telling his friend all that, he speaks. "I'm glad you told me," he says with a smile and Mike only nods in response, because he's not sure that he's glad he told him. It didn't do a whole lot to get the images and emotions attached to what happened out of his head and the burden that had settled into his chest hasn't lifted in the slightest.

Out of nowhere, Will sighs. "You want El, don't you," he states and Mike's head snaps up, wondering how on earth he knew. When he goes to stammer out an answer, not wanting Will to feel bad, he beats him to it, saying, "Mike, it's okay, I get it." Relieved, Mike smiles as he watches his friend pull on his backpack. "Thanks for listening," he tells him earnestly and Will nods. "Anytime. I hope you feel better soon," he tells him as he heads for the door.

A thought is nagging at him, so he decides to make something clear before he leaves. "Hey Will?" He turns around to look back at him. "You're still my best friend, you know that, right?" His friend's smile is honest as he replies, "Of course and you're mine," before shutting the door, most likely heading in the direction of the gym, since El is in her second period health class right now.

He sighs, swinging his feet as he contemplates what he's going to say to her and why he needs her more than Will. He loves Will, he's been friends with him for forever and has trusted him with more secrets that he can count...but El understands his night terrors more than he does, just by default of not wanting to burden his still-healing friend. It's been almost two years, but the nightmares and flashbacks continue to haunt him, and he'd much rather be strong for Will then make Will be strong for him.

When he hears the click of the door unlocking quietly, his head snaps up and he feels like he can finally breathe again when a head of brown curls pokes into the room. She doesn't say anything as she locks the door behind her and, without an ounce of hesitation, crosses the room to wrap him in her arms.

His body instantly releases the tension he was holding, shuddering as his arms wrap around her waist and he hides his face in her shoulder, her curls tickling his forehead.

There are no words to be said, though the silence is humming with the comfort she willingly pours out onto him. He holds her tightly, making sure not to suffocate her, but it feels so good to be in her arms, sheltered and protected from the monster haunting his thoughts. It always baffles him how just her and her alone is enough to erase the anxious knots in his stomach, but he's not complaining and, in fact, loves her all the more for it. Feeling his mind slow down

and the adrenaline cease to rush through his veins frantically, he snuggles into the crook of her neck farther as her fingers on one hand dance along his back and the other play with the ends of his hair, stroking it soothingly.

Even when he finally pulls back, she doesn't let go of him completely and watches him patiently as he gathers himself. He's grateful beyond what she'll ever know that she never pressures him into talking or telling her what he's struggling with, because most of the time, he just needs her.

But he still hasn't had a chance to properly debrief the events of last night or the flashbacks that keep coming out of nowhere. There's so much swirling around in his head that pretty soon, he just starts talking, gripping her hands and letting words come out of his mouth without a second thought.

"I hurt her, El," he mumbles ashamedly. "I didn't have any control over what I was doing...well, I did, but I just was so scared that it was all pure instinct, trying to protect myself..." he scoffs, shaking his head, "from something that didn't even exist in the first place. What if...I mean, that could've been one of our friends or...or you..." Her hands come to cup his cheeks tenderly, skimming her thumbs over his freckles as she does her best to calm his fears. "But it wasn't. And we'll figure out how to beat it, together. You...you could've been hurt, too," she tells him quietly. He bites his lip and nods, knowing she's right. It could've been worse, but his mom's okay, shaken up, but not severely hurt and he's physically okay, so there's that.

But something else she said caught his attention. "You're willing to help me?" he asks timidly. He has no freaking clue how, or if these can even stop and it might take years to train his mind not to randomly see things in his room, but...

"Of course," she tells him, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I don't want to see them hurting you, either." Her smile could melt even the coldest heart and he feels his insides do somersaults as he smiles back tenderly.

She hops up onto the counter beside him, their arms touching as they fall into an easy silence. He feels so content just sitting here next to

her, but there's still something he feels he needs to say out loud—make it real, admit vulnerability.

"I've never been afraid of my own mind before," he confesses quietly, timidly.

El's expression falls and she lowers her gaze to her hands at that and a sickening feeling spreads through his gut when he suddenly realizes why.

She can relate. She's...she's afraid of her mind too. Much, much more than he is, even.

The silence is heavy before he slices through it. "You understand, don't you," he murmurs. It's not a question, it's a statement, a blatant statement as he concludes that she's had to wrestle with this fear far more often than he has. She nods her head, her eyes serious when she looks back up at him and his heart sinks. He holds her gaze for a beat, things passing between them that he can barely explain.

Without a word, he lifts his arm to wrap it around her shoulders and she immediately scoots closer to nestle into his side, his cheek resting on her head as she gets as close as she can to him.

They take solace in each other, resting in the moment of mutual empathy and sorrow for their anguished minds. He takes immense comfort in knowing that she understands, but he still can't help the apology that's been resting on the tip of his tongue.

"I'm sorry, I know I don't have it even half as bad as you do," he almost whispers, keeping his voice lighthearted, attempting to brush his problems under the rug, but it falls short when he feels her shake her head. "You're hurting too," she replies, tenderly squeezing the hand that's not protectively wrapped around her and he swallows the lump in his throat that threatens to break free. His guard comes tumbling down and he buries his face in her curls, holding on tight to her and she grasps the fingers of his hand, playing with them delicately to keep him grounded.

And slowly, very slowly, he begins to feel okay. He begins to feel like maybe he can move forward and fight back against the darker part of

his mind. Maybe he doesn't have to shrink away from his friends because he's afraid he'll hurt them. Maybe this is where things turn around and life stops dragging him downhill. Maybe he still does deserve to be happy.

And maybe, just maybe, the beautiful girl burrowed in his arms is the catalyst for all of that. Because if she's brave enough and strong enough to fight her own demons, maybe he can too.

29. Paper Rose

She had never really considered art or drawing before she met Will. Sure, Mike would sketch some things sometime for a campaign when the world he was creating was getting too big to fit inside his head and she had a knack for doodling when she was bored, but it was Will who introduced her to the magic behind what can be created with just a piece of paper and a pencil.

His drawings were beautiful. She caught a glimpse of them every once and awhile, since a few of them were hanging on his fridge at home or tacked up in his room, but it wasn't until he presented the party with drawings portraying each of them as their D & D characters that she got to study one up close.

And wow, was he talented. When he hands her the drawing he did of Eleven the Mage, she gasps and can't tear her eyes away from it. The figure on the page is draped in a sleek black, flowing robe, the dress underneath a baby pink that matches the flowers in her long, silky brown hair. Her gaze is focused somewhere off in the distance, most likely on some enemy she's about to smite, her hand outstretched and she can feel the power radiating from this character.

And her face. She's reeling at how accurate Will drew her features and even though it sounds cliché, it truly is like looking in a mirror. Her eyes, her nose, her lips, even her jawline is perfect and she looks so...empowered and confident that she quickly forgets this is just a drawing. The girl on the page is both better than her and wonderfully, perfectly her at the same time and...she loves it.

The rest of the Party is buzzing excitedly around her, gushing about their own drawings, but she hears none of it as her head snaps up and her eyes lock with Will's. "Teach me to draw," she pleads.

And he does.

That was two years ago and now, several lessons, pointers and afternoon sketching sessions later, she's finally enrolled in her first art class in school. With a little persuading from Hopper and the Party, she managed to bypass Beginning Drawing and go straight to

Advanced Drawing, a class that few get into. But as soon as the teacher saw the drawing she did recently of Castle Byers, he let her in without any dispute. Yes, she was *that* good.

Mike was so proud of her. He remembers the first few drawings she had done and while he didn't want to say they were bad, she definitely had...improved. By a LOT. She always had struggled to find things she was good at and with the Party constantly reassuring her that her talents didn't define who she was, she learned to be content with the skills she had been given.

But underneath her confidence, Mike could see that it still bugged her when she came in last place or created something that she deemed lesser as compared to everyone else's. Admittedly, he too held that same insecurity, but he was lucky enough to find the areas he was designed for. Science and stories, those were his creative avenues, the places his mind would escape to when it got tired of reality.

He was ecstatic that El had finally found hers and he told her so excessively. Every time she'd hand him her latest drawing, he'd gush about it, trying to find the words to express how talented she was and how proud he was of her. He'd end up rambling, but she didn't mind and would listen to him with the happiest smile on her face. Eventually, she'd silence him with a kiss when he'd start to run out of words, her drawing forgotten between them as she thanked him for his undying kindness and he returned her affections sincerely.

Aside from El getting in to her drawing class, the beginning of their junior year was...relatively uneventful. Just another year at Hawkins High, a place the Party had mastered by now.

Or so they thought.

Dustin's the first one to break the stunned silence when they're handed their schedules in their first period homeroom class. "We only get lunch together two times a week?"

"That's correct Mr. Henderson," their teacher calls from the front of the classroom. "Could I have your attention please? As you all know, Hawkins High is expanding rapidly, with more students than we've ever had and we're offering more classes this year as well. As such,

we can't afford for the each grade to have their own lunch period anymore, due to the classes that must be during either fourth, fifth or sixth period. You have all been assigned the lunch period that works best with your schedule. However, we understand that you still want lunch with all your friends. Tuesdays and Thursdays have become block days, meaning you will only have four of your classes and they will all be an hour and a half long. You will get common lunch on those days, when the entire building goes on break for lunch."

El and Mike stopped listening the second she explained that they all had different lunch periods. Instead, they had taken to staring at their schedules in disbelief, their desks scooted as close to the other as possible. She reaches for his hand when they suddenly realize it at the same time.

They don't have a single period together this semester.

Not a single one.

"Mike-

"We'll still see each other every day. I'll make sure of it. When I finally get the car next month, I'll pick you up every day for school and I'll take you home every afternoon." His thumb strokes her hand as he does everything he can to reassure her. "I-I can go talk to counseling, see if somehow I can drop my fifth period class and come have lunch with you-

She cuts him off sharply. "Mike, you can't. You love physics, you can't drop that class." "But I love you even more," he replies and her stomach flips deliciously, her face heating up, no matter how many times she's heard it.

"We'll figure it out," she tells him determinedly. "We'll still spend every afternoon with the Party, right?" "Yeah, yeah of course. And maybe they'll even let us have a couple afternoons to ourselves," he suggests, a hopeful smile on his face and she nods in agreement. With calculated breaths, she lets the panic subside, knowing that there's nothing that could keep the two of them apart. If less time together during the school day means an extra amount of time together when they're finally free, then so be it.

Not seeing El for seven hours certainly was an adjustment. In a high school as small as theirs was, one would think they'd cross paths at least once, but no, somehow their schedules made it so they'd have to take a ridiculously inconvenient route to each of their classes in order to run into one another. Begrudgingly, they both agreed that it was better to avoid tardiness and stay out of detention than have their academic records destroyed their junior year just to see one another for a few seconds.

And so the school year began. Their homework load ramped up considerably and whispers of their future began to linger around the corners, but the Party stayed strong, supporting one another endlessly and the first few months sailed by relatively smoothly.

Mike sighs as he twists the dial on his locker, absentmindedly putting in his combo and opening it when he hears the click.

He wasn't going to pretend he was in the best mood today. It was a Wednesday, meaning he should've had lunch with El and the rest of his friends yesterday, but she had an English project due on Friday and she spent all of lunch, plus that afternoon working on it. He hadn't seen her in over twenty-four hours and, frankly, it sucked. He was able to talk to her over the phone for a little bit the previous night, but nothing beats the real, living, breathing El.

His mind wanders as he stores away the textbooks he won't be needing for the rest of the day, but he snaps back into reality when he takes his lunchbox out and a piece of paper flutters to the ground.

He examines it curiously, wondering how on earth it got there. He bends down to pick it up and when he flips it over, he can't help the ridiculously dopey grin that lights up his face instantly.

It's a rose. Sketched onto the ripped of corner of a piece of notebook paper is the best pencil drawing of a rose he's ever seen. Its petals are beautiful, blossoming from a well-shaded stem. His eyes trace it down the paper and his heart begins to beat widely when he sees her signature scrawled in the space underneath the stem.

"Love, El" it reads and he can't stop smiling as he feels his face heat

up.

Has he mentioned he loves this girl?

Suddenly, an idea pops into his head and he grabs his own notebook from his locker before shutting it and heading to the AV room where he eats lunch alone everyday.

Once the door has been shut behind him, he plops down at the desk and clears a space for him to work. Taking out a pencil, he turns to a clean page and begins to draw. His art skills aren't anywhere close to rivaling El's, so he settles on cartoon flowers instead, making them big and extravagant, even throwing a little color in there too. When he's sketched out as many as he can, he pauses to eat his sandwich as he admires his handiwork, then glances around the room in search of a pair of scissors. The first pair he finds happens to be lying by a ball of string they keep in here just in case they need to fix something with it.

'Perfect,' he thinks, and sets about cutting out all the flowers he's drawn. Glancing at the clock, he sees there isn't much time left in his lunch period, so he hurriedly finishes cutting the last ones and when he's done, he arranges them in a makeshift bouquet. Picking up the rose she made for him, he places it in the center and ties a piece of string around their stems, securing them all together.

'Love, Mike' he writes below one of the flowers he drew and places a kiss on it, just for luck.

He doesn't have time to slip it into her locker as he rushes to his seventh period, so he resolves to put it there the next day, since he passes by her locker between third and fourth period. Hypothetically, he could just give it to her after school today, but where's the fun in that?

The following day, he quickly unlocks her locker and, making sure she isn't around, places the paper bouquet inside. He isn't anticipating some big reaction from her because of it, he just wants her to know that he's thinking of her and he cares for her.

He's more confused than anything when he opens his locker a few

periods later and sees a drawing of an Eggo lying on top of his notebooks. "Thank you for the flowers," is written on the back and he almost laughs out loud when he realizes she's showing her gratitude with an Eggo.

He likes this. He likes giving her little gifts in the middle of the day and getting her reply in return. Even though they're not face-to-face, it's fun to keep in contact with her during the long school day.

He could've just kept the Eggo and mentioned it to her after school. But he's not ready for this to be over quite yet.

So he spends his lunch doodling a bunch of the toaster waffles she loves so much, attaching them to hand drawn sticks and arranging them to create a bouquet out of Eggos, a heart drawn on the back of every one of them.

It's one of the best things he's ever created, if he does say so himself.

He repeats his actions from the previous day, purposefully avoiding mentioning what she had drawn for him when he sees her that afternoon and slips the bouquet into her locker after third period, smiling as he does so.

And thus started a pattern that made his days a million times better. When he went to pick up his lunch, she'd have a new drawing for him every day, even on days they saw each other during lunch. He'd spend his free period making something to give to her in return, whether it was physically adding onto the picture, an extra addition to make her smile, writing a poem about what she had created or just simply leaving her a note saying how amazing her drawings were becoming, making sure to remind her every time that he loves her and he's proud of her.

Funny thing is, they never spoke a word about it to one another. It's almost as if they were daring each other to speak first, see who could beat the other in the "Paper Wars" as he'd dubbed it for himself. The first one to acknowledge that it was happening lost and if losing meant that this ended...well, he intended to pretend it didn't exist until the end of time if he had to.

Her drawings ranged anywhere from animals to human faces to random objects she saw in her classroom and he enjoyed finding new things to add to them. He returned a horse she drew with a sketch of the two of them riding it off into the sunset, wrote a free verse poem about the drawing of a lake that she did, attempted to draw a hand intertwining with the one she had sketched out (that failed miserably and after several exchanged notes that consisted of her teasing him over how bad it was, he dared her to try it herself. Which she did. And blew him away), the list goes on and on.

It was jarring to find a very detailed, intense drawing of the Demogorgon resting in his locker one day, about a month after the Paper Wars started. He chose not to reply to it, only stuffing it in his backpack hastily before anyone could see and making a mental note to ask her about it later. He didn't even care if it meant he finally lost, he knew she wouldn't put that in his locker without a reason. That time in their lives was scarring to all of them and there had to be an explanation for her choosing to draw out one of her demons.

"Are you okay?" he asks her quietly as they sit in the Hawkins High parking lot after school in his car. Rain streams down the windows, plinking on the roof of the car, but they aren't in a hurry to get anywhere. His keys sit unturned in the ignition as he watches her face closely, sensing something was up. Her backpack sits in her lap and she rests her chin on it, staring at the dashboard, her lips turned down just the slightest bit.

"I haven't had a dream about...about that night in so long," she begins, murmuring quietly, only speaking loud enough to be heard over the rain. His fingers are tangled with hers in an instant and he allows the silence to settle as he watches her chase her thoughts around in her head. When she lands on something she doesn't like, her face begins to crinkle up, but he quickly squeezes her hand to bring her back to the present.

"El, it's over," he tells her gently. "You did it. It's dead. We don't have to worry about that part of our lives anymore." The hand that's not clasping his starts to fiddle with her backpack straps as she nods half heartedly.

"But Mike...I almost...you could've..." she pauses, scrambling for the

words, her breathing starting to kick up and as soon as he sees this, he quickly puts a finger under her chin and guides her gaze to his. "A lot of things could've happened that night. Trust me, I know. But the only thing that matters is you made it. You survived, El. I survived, thanks to you. We're all okay now, and you have to focus on that, not the hypothetical things that could've happened."

It seems to do the trick and she nods as she lets out the breath that she'd seemed to be holding. "Let's just go home," she mumbles, gripping his hand tighter.

He drives them to his house with one hand on the steering wheel and the other entwined with hers. He's still a little worried that he hadn't caught onto her solemn demeanor until she'd given him that drawing, but he trusts her and is glad she said something about it eventually.

Speaking of the drawing, it occurs to him that they never directly mentioned it. It was implied, but it was never acknowledged. Which meant...the Paper Wars were still on.

He had a pile of her drawings in his locker by now and he was happy that it continued to grow every day, as did the stack in hers. Her sketches began to get more complex as time went on and sometimes, he'd have to wait a whole week to see what she'd been working on, giving him more time to craft a response worthy of what she had created.

Which is why, when he didn't get anything from her for a couple days, he wasn't concerned at all. A week went by and he eagerly awaited what was to come, knowing her next drawing had to be coming soon.

Except, it didn't. And he didn't receive anything the next week either. By the third week, he was extremely tempted to just ask her about it, using the rationale that he must've already won if she stopped doing it, but just in case, he held back, waiting patiently for her to break their standstill.

It ended up paying off, because on the Wednesday of the fourth week, he opened his locker to see a brand new sheet of paper lying on his textbooks. He pulls it out eagerly and when he flips it over, he

can't help the gasp that escapes him or the tears that instantly clog his throat.

She had been drawing *him*. She took the time to draw his face and it's the best, most detailed portrait she's ever done. His heart explodes with affection and pride for his girl and he can't stop staring at it, marveling at just how intricate and beautiful it was. Somehow, with just a pencil, she managed to put an emotion on his face that he's only ever seen on hers and it makes him want to weep just looking at it.

He hastily gathers up his lunch and her drawing, swinging his backpack onto his back as he does so. When he arrives at the AV room, he quickly shuts the door, plops himself down at a table, opens his notebook and lets whatever his mind wants to say spill out onto the page, his heart fluttering madly as he does so.

"Dear El," He writes.

"Once upon a time, a boy and a girl happened to be in the woods on a stormy night, one searching and one fleeing.

Though this was no happenstance. Unbeknownst to both of them, their very souls were intertwined, bound together by a ribbon, a ribbon that was tired of being stretched so far. Aching for the other person, it tugged and tugged and tugged, until the two ends met as rain poured down around them.

And in an instant, the boy was hers. And she, his. Completely and irrevocably. Just like it always was meant to be.

Four years later, the girl drew the boy. She drew him in a way that no mirror, no reflection could ever express.

She drew him when he's looking at her. She drew him in undeniable love.

She drew the hair that he's been growing out especially for her, letting it curl at the ends just so they match. He loves her hair, even more so when her curls twirl around his own when they're close enough, further proving they were meant to be together.

She drew his ears, barely poking through that mop of hair, that love nothing more than the sound of her voice. They await it eagerly, anxiously, restless until he hears her sweet voice once more and he can finally breathe again.

She drew his freckles, the ones she has a strange fascination with. Before he was Frog Face, he was Freckle Boy and he used to bitterly joke with himself that God had given him a freckle for every insecurity he held. Now, she once said that he has a freckle for every time he's told her he loves her. "But that number is countless," he insisted. "Exactly," she murmured as she once again failed to count them all.

She drew his cheeks all round and soft and he knows if it were in color, he'd be blushing. It's rare that he can do anything but when she looks at him. Her eyes send a spark to his soul, lighting him up in ways he can't describe and he never minds it when he feels his cheeks flush, because he knows that it makes her happy.

She drew his lips and he laughed when he saw they were a little more puffy than usual. *Of course* this is the look he gives her right after a kiss. He's so enamored with her that his mind blanks out every time their lips meet and he can't do anything but stare at her lovingly as his stomach does flips over and over again.

And finally, she drew his eyes. And in them, he sees the same emotion he sees in hers everyday. His heart beats wildly in his gaze, all vulnerable and open, because only she can tear down his walls like that. He sees everything displayed in his own eyes and he prays she can see it too.

And as for him? He wrote this. He wrote this so she would know that he's all hers, every inch. She's rendered him hopelessly smitten and he wants her to know that the love that shines on his face is all for her. He doesn't look at anyone else like that, because he doesn't love anyone else the way he so desperately loves her.

You're incredible, El.

Love, Mike."

He sets his pencil down, his chest heaving with a big sigh as he looks over his work, relieved that the words he urgently needed to say to her were out on a page. He smiles despite himself and quickly wipes away the few emotional tears that escaped him as he wrote out something that resembled only a fraction of his feelings for her.

He doesn't want to wait until tomorrow to give this to her, so he takes the risk of being late, making his way across the school and carefully slipping both the drawing and his writing into her locker.

The rest of the school day drags on slower than he would've liked and he doesn't have it in him to focus during his last few classes. He still can't get over what she had created for him and he's more than willing to lose the Paper Wars if it means thanking her in person.

When the bell finally rings, he hurriedly walks down the hallways and heads outside, taking his spot by the entrance where he always meets her after school. He bounces on his toes anxiously, watching the flow of students pour out of the doors, looking for a head of eccentric brown curls. The crowd is starting to thin out and he's considering going in to find her himself when she suddenly comes bursting through the doors and his only warning is a choked call of his name, before she's running towards him. He gathers her up in his arms, grinning as she buries her face in his neck, holding on tightly to him and her body shakes as she sobs softly. Dropping a kiss against her shoulder, he leans his head against hers and grips her tenderly, rocking her slightly from side to side.

"M-Mike, I love you s-so much," she tells him, her words tripping over her tears and dripping with emotion. "I d-don't know what I did to deserve you, your letter-" She's cut off by a sob that forces its way up her throat and he rubs her back lovingly as he waits for her to finish. "Your letter was b-beautiful."

He pulls back just enough so he can meet her eyes, which are sparkling with passion and emotion. "You do deserve it El. You deserve every single inch of my love for you. I'm the one who doesn't deserve you, you're perfect," he tells her.

She's shaking her head before he's even finished. "You're wrong. You're wrong," she whispers over and over again, her shoulders

continuing to shake as she tilts her head to press her lips against his with a whimper. He sighs into their kiss, relishing in the softness of her lips and pulling as close as he can, feeling himself fall farther and farther into everything that she is.

He has no doubt that the dopey grin on his face when she slowly pulls back matches the one she drew and when he meets her eyes, he's convinced he'll never be able to look away.

After much lighthearted debating, he ended up persuading her to keep both her portrait and his letter. "I want you to know that I'm thinking about you whenever you look at it," he told her. "You deserve to be looked at the way I look at you and I don't want you to forget that."

Unbeknownst to him, she'd always secretly wished she could take a picture of the serene moment after they kissed and while their friends found it a little creepy, it now hangs proudly in her room, sending butterflies through her stomach every time she meets his pencil-drawn gaze.

A/N: Hello wonderful people! I am completely out of ideas. I usually have a few one shots planned out in advance as I'm writing each one, but this was the last one shot I had planned out and I have no idea where to go from here. If you have any prompt requests or Mileven scenarios you want to see, please let me know, I am totally open to suggestions! Thank you!

30. Father

All in all, El's third Christmas in Hawkins outside of the lab had been a success.

It was a quieter day than the past two years, as most of her friends' families decided to venture outside of their town to go visit relatives and friends for the holidays, leaving just El, Mike and Dustin at home for the first week of break. Dustin, bless his heart, didn't mind third-wheeling with the couple as they all got together to laze about, watching movies, building snowmen, whatever the three of them felt like doing as they finally got to breathe after their first semester of sophomore year. The trio actually got along surprisingly well, making for a relaxed, enjoyable first week while they waited for their friends to get back.

El spent Christmas morning just with Hopper exchanging the little gifts they'd gotten for each other and spending the day in their pajamas, stuffing themselves with whatever food they had while watching old Christmas movies on their TV.

After convincing their parents to let them duck out of their familial festivities later that evening, Mike and Dustin joined the pair at the cabin, with Hopper and Dustin turning a blind eye while Mike and El exchanged 'Merry Christmas' kisses.

Among the gift giving and cookie eating that ensued that night, Mike offhandedly mentioned his aunt and uncle coming down from upstate Indiana to spend a couple of days with them that week, only to stop abruptly when he realized they'd be here the day that El was planning on coming over so they could spend time together.

"...do you want to meet them?" he asks her timidly, knowing she's not fond of new people and she bites her lip, not wanting to say no, but the shy side of her really is not a fan of the idea. "They'll be bringing my baby cousin Adam too." That sparked her interest. She had never actually gotten to see a baby up close, since all the people she knew were done having kids and she'd only ever gotten a small glimpse of the babies around Hawkins. Enthusiastically, she agrees and Mike smiles. "Cool, I'll let them know. They're awesome people, I'm sure

they'd love to meet you too!" he tells her and she grins, already excited to meet a new part of his family.

That changes quickly, however. The more she thinks about it, the more her thoughts remind her that she very well could be horrible with babies and could mess something up terribly. Not to mention that this was her first impression on some of Mike's relatives and she's the *worst* at first impressions, always screwing up something and having to work extra hard to reverse her mistake.

Her stomach is doing flips when she arrives at the Wheeler house a few days later, which is not an uncommon occurrence, but today it's out of her unrelenting nerves rather than excitement and she taps her hand on her leg as she hears the quiet conversations inside halt and footsteps come closer to the door.

Mike opens it, much to her relief and she returns his loving smile, stepping into his embrace as he reaches for her. The knot of anxiety in her stomach begins to melt away as she breathes him in, a little less scared as he silently reassures her that he won't leave her side through today.

He lets her pull back when she's finally ready and she glances over Mike's shoulder to see an older man with a kind face leaning against the entryway of the living room.

"El, this is my Uncle Mark," Mike says and she bravely steps forward to shake the man's hand. "Hello, it's nice to meet you," she says as politely as she can. "Nice to meet you too, El, Mike's been talking about you for a while," Uncle Mark replies, his eyes teasing, yet affectionate and she likes him instantly. A blush spreads across her cheeks as she pictures Mike going on and on about her, almost giggling when Mike clears his throat.

"And this is Aunt Donna," he says hastily as her gaze falls on the woman sitting in a rocking chair right by the fireplace. She smiles warmly up at her and El does her best to return her greeting, but she's too curious about the bundle Aunt Donna is holding in her arms.

"And Adam?" she asks quietly, timidly, not wanting to seem like she's disregarding Mike's aunt, but wanting so badly to get a closer look at

the little child.

It catches her off guard when the woman gently asks, "Do you want to hold him?" Her tone is encouraging and El just can't say no.

She nods wordlessly and goes to take a seat on the couch, Mike sitting beside her as they watch Donna rise to her feet with the little bundle in her arms, cradling him delicately. El wipes her hands on her palms, swallowing hard, not wanting to make a mistake, but Mike's hand on her back grounds her and she sits up straighter. Confidently, she stretches out her hands and his mother smiles reassuringly at her before setting the child she birthed into El's arms.

There's a moment of panic when neither person has a steady grip on him, and El hurriedly secures her arms around the baby, marveling at its soft warmth. When he's supported and nestled safely in her lap, her eyes flicker up to his face and she gasps quietly as she pulls back the corner of the blanket resting on his cheek.

He looks so...fragile. So fragile and beautiful as he sleeps peacefully, his perfect face twitching every once in a while as sights and sensations float through his brain. Her eyes trace the curve of his button nose, the shape of his mouth, marveling at how little a human could be. Her finger brushes timidly across the smoothness of his cheek and her heart simply melts when the child nuzzles into the warmth of her hand, still fast asleep.

"He's beautiful," she whispers breathlessly, daring to look back up at Adam's parents for a second to see them watching her adoringly. "Isn't he?" Uncle Mark responds gently and El nods, before readjusting him in her arms slightly, gazing back down at his face.

This wonderful being trusts her, she muses. He's helpless, unable to fend for himself, desperate to be sheltered by anyone who could keep him safe and in this moment, even in his sleep, he trusts her to watch over him. While that thought should scare her, something inside her swells at the thought of being so trustworthy in the mind of a child. Even though she isn't related to him (yet) and this is the first time she's ever laid eyes on him, she can feel the stirring need to protect the bundle in her arms with everything she has. His trust is precious to her and she would do anything to defend it. Because she knows

what it's like to be helpless. And she's forever grateful for the people who honored the trust she placed in them in her most vulnerable state.

She's jolted from her wandering thoughts when the baby shifts and begins to whimper. Out of instinct, she quietly shushes him, doing her best to rock him soothingly side to side, but it's no use as his whimpers abruptly become cries and her heart rate spikes as he scrunches up his face and wails.

She suddenly panics, feeling increasingly inadequate to deal with him, doubling her efforts to get him to calm down, to protect him the way he's asking her to, but he just continues to cry and scream and she doesn't know what to do and she must've done something wrong and she can't fix this-

"I've got him, El, don't worry about it," a voice comes from above her and she looks up to see Mike's uncle reaching out his arms to scoop up his child. Numbly, she hands him over, watching him cradle the boy delicately and she shrinks back into Mike's arms.

He pulls her to him and presses his lips against her temple. "That was great, El," he whispers in her ear and she cuddles into his embrace. "How was it?" he murmurs against her hair.

A lump forms in her throat, but she refuses to let it win, concentrating on breathing in and out. In and out, she lets her breaths flow. She focuses on her heartbeat, steady and strong, allowing it to slow until it thumps gently, as she listens to the thrumming heartbeat below her ear.

"That was...overwhelming. He's so...*little*," she settles on eventually, fiddling anxiously with the edge of his shirt and she hears him sigh as he holds her a little bit tighter. "I'm proud of you," he tells her quietly, his smile evident in his voice, warm and soothing. The heaviness on her chest begins to lift as she allows the gentle touch of Mike's fingers stroking her arm to center her.

Donna has excused herself to go to the restroom and Mike's uncle has taken to wandering aimlessly around the living room, concentrating on the baby in his arms more than where he's going as he gently

bounces his son up and down and whispering to him in hushed tones, quieting his cries. El's eyes follow him lazily as she snuggles in Mike's embrace, curious and awestruck at the amount of patience and love he holds for his child.

It's when the man eventually takes a seat in the chair by the crackling fire that her thoughts begin to drift to her own paternal figures.

Her mind starts at Hopper. How, although he never met her as a baby and wasn't around when she was still a little child, he's cradled her like that before. Like nothing in the world could stop him from making her feel loved. Whether it was after a nightmare, a fight or just simply when she needed a hug, he knew when to drop everything and give her the comfort she longed for. Sure, Mike could provide that same comfort as well, but there was something about a father figure embracing her that made her feel completely secure, like she didn't need to worry about her safety anymore because she was completely protected.

But she wasn't the first daughter the man she now calls her father had held.

She's seen Sarah's baby pictures before. She's seen the overwhelming joy that a camera happened to capture whenever he held her, his only biological child. It's the most alive she's ever seen his face, painted with wonder, devotion, anxiety, love, she could see it all in the picture she had found in Sarah's belongings. She was his light.

El had always struggled with the fact that she had replaced her. A small part of her was convinced she would never live up to Hopper's expectations of a daughter or that she was just a stand-in, an archetype of what he wished he had. No matter how many times her adoptive father tried to convince her that she had filled the black hole in his heart beyond what he could comprehend, she was always prone to insecurity, and so, would lay awake at night wondering if Hopper was awake too, crying over the little girl he had lost, the child he would never have.

As she continued to watch Mark tend to Adam, she couldn't help but notice the same emotions Hopper held for Sarah shining on his face and she internally begs whatever higher force is listening to let him

keep his son, to let him cherish him and raise him like...like...

'Like Hopper never got to raise his,' her mind fills in for her and while she agrees with that statement, the next thought that pops up wriggles through her attempts to grasp it and before she knows it, a voice whispers, 'Like your mama never got to raise you,' and suddenly, she's squeezing her eyes shut as memories of the man she had called her dad for the first twelve years of her life come flooding in.

The man who most certainly never held her with the tenderness that Adam's being held with. The man who refused to nurture through her childhood. The man who never looked at her the way Hopper looked at Sarah or Mike's uncle looked at Adam. The man who just wanted to use her to win a war, not because he cared for her in any capacity.

Mama had shown her what happened. She'd seen herself as a baby, even more fragile and delicate than Adam is right now, being ripped from her mother by that man, the bond that forms between a child and their parent broken the second she was in his arms.

That man was not her Papa. The lying, deceitful bastard, she hates that she ever called him that. Hates that that label ever led her to believe that he was her loyal guardian, that she could trust him with anything, that he would nurture her and care for her the way a father would his child.

For a moment, she allows herself to be selfish, bitterness settling in her stomach as she watches Mike's uncle whisper sweet nothings to his son.

That could've been her and Mama. She could've been rocked by the light of a fire, snug and warm in a blanket without anything to worry about. She could've been calmed by her lullaby, instead of the stone cold nursery rhymes Papa used to read to her. She could've been a normal child, growing up beneath the sun under her mother's watchful gaze, but instead she got her light from the artificial bulbs that hurt her eyes when she woke up in the morning and she was watched through their cameras.

They'd damaged her. Oh, how they'd damaged her. She's proven that

her scars can heal, but that doesn't stop them from resurfacing every now and then, keeping the thought in her mind that she will never be whole again. The wounds that started when she was an infant were the ones that hurt the most. The neglect. The abuse. The lack of care.

It scares her how easily they were able to manipulate her, convince her that the scars they were giving her were normal. Her young mind couldn't have known better, it had never seen the outside world, never experienced what a parent was supposed to be like and so, the bad men took advantage of the precious vulnerability a baby holds without an inch of remorse.

Make one wrong move and Adam could be damaged too.

She simultaneously wanted to hug Adam's dad out of gratitude for his unconditional love toward his son and scream at him to make him realize what a delicate thing he holds in his arms. But she supposes he realized that the second Adam arrived into the world.

She admires him, admires Hopper for the strength and durability they both held in raising a child, because heaven knows their job is beyond important and ridiculously easy to mess up. It's almost too easy, her thoughts remark darkly, Papa's face still hovering in her mind.

...what if...

Her previously half-lidded eyes shoot open and she sucks in a breath, a thought occurring to her that she's never come across before. Her chest begins to constrict and she stands up quickly, forcing herself to tear her eyes away from the father and child before her.

Mike's hand is slipping in hers in an instant and she distantly hears him call her name, but her mind is spiraling to a terrifying place, one she's never visited before, though she briefly considers the possibility that it's always been there.

She spares a glance back at him, his concerned eyes accented by the fire. "Come with me?" she whispers, her voice shaking only slightly as she tugs on his hand. He nods somewhat reluctantly, but gets to his feet anyway. "Excuse us," El quickly remembers to say to the man

sitting across from them as she hurriedly leads Mike out of the room and up the stairs.

He remains silent as she grips his hand tightly, heading straight for his room, fumbling for his doorknob in the darkness. She pushes the door open, leading him in without a word and he flicks on the lights, turning to face her, worry sketched into his features.

"El, what's wrong?" he asks her gently, taking hold of both her hands and lacing their fingers together. Without a second thought, her mind shuts the door and she ducks her head, piecing together her words as he waits patiently.

"Mike, if...if we...," she starts, but it suddenly catches up to her how presumptuous what she wants—no, *needs* to tell him is. She doesn't want him taking this the wrong way, knowing he very well could, but this...this is important. Really important. And when she looks back up into his warm, honest eyes, she lets her fears wash away as she gazes at the boy who could one day be her husband.

"Mike, promise me something." Her voice is so soft, she briefly wonders if he even understood her at all. But he takes a step forward, squeezing her hands as he replies, "Anything," and her heart melts into a puddle. Finding strength in his eyes, she continues.

"If we ever have kids...promise..." She releases a shuddering breath, collecting herself. "Promise me you'll be the best father you can possibly be to them."

She trusts Mike. She trusts Mike with all of her being.

But she also trusted Papa.

There is no connection between the two men and she's very aware that they couldn't be more different if they tried, Mike being infinitely better than the man who kidnapped and raised her.

But that doesn't stop her thoughts from flashing to their future children, knowing somewhere in her heart that they were going to end up as parents one day. Together. Parents of a beautiful, delicate, defenseless little baby, born out of the unfathomable love they hold

for one another and that baby is going to depend on them and blindly trust them for its survival.

And if they screw it up...if the baby's father screws it up...the loss of paternal love would destroy any child, let alone their's.

It would mean trauma beyond repair. Scars. Nightmares. Flashbacks. Pain. The same pain she seeks to soothe within her every single day.

She can't let that happen. No, she *won't* let that happen. She hasn't even met their child yet and she's already prepared to defend it with her life.

She holds her breath, fearing for just a moment what her boyfriend's reaction will be. The look on his face is one of a confused surprise before it gives way to intense concern and she just *knows* he's wondering where this came from. She waits patiently, holding his gaze steadily until finally, finally his features soften into a tender determination. He takes one step closer to her, letting go of one of her hands to cradle her cheek gently and she can feel her pulse racing as she looks into his bottomless eyes.

"El," he begins, his voice soft and completely serious. "I promise you with all of my heart that I will love and protect and support our future children with everything I have. No matter what happens, I'll always be there for them and they will have the father they need. I won't...I won't be like your Papa, not even close. Hell, I won't even be like *my* dad. I'll do everything I can to be the dad you deserve. You have my word, El. They'll always be safe."

She exhales slowly, the tension easing off her shoulders and she smiles at him gratefully before wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her head against his sweater. There are tears in her throat and she lets them fall softly as she clings to the wonderful boy she knows will be by her side for the rest of her life.

He understands. He understands this fear she's had buried within her maybe better than she does and he's willing to work through it with her, something that makes her cling to him tighter, wanting him to know how much she appreciates him.

She's scared, so scared that she'll raise a damaged child, but he gets that, in a way that no one else does. And maybe...maybe he's afraid of the same thing.

"I promise to be a good mother," she whispers, her voice muffled by his shoulder, but he hears her all the same and squeezes her fiercely, pressing his lips to her head and letting them linger. "You will be an amazing mother," he murmurs against her hair. "Our kids will be lucky to have you."

Her chuckle is shaky as her tears come faster, but he's got her, letting her have this tender moment without letting her go under. "They're going to love you," she tells him, meaning it with all her heart.

"I love you," he replies and she turns her face to nuzzle into his neck. "I love you too," she whispers back.

She never doubted how strong of a parent again he would be after that day. Her faith that their children would adore him and be sheltered by him never faltered as she watched him grow into a young man that she fell more and more in love with through every passing day.

Ten years later, she would watch, exhausted but elated from her hospital bed, as he held his firstborn child, a son, for the first time. She would watch as he cradled him lovingly, tears streaming unabashedly in his cheeks, the pure, overwhelming joy and adoration shining so brightly on his face.

And she knew then that her fears would forever be silenced.

31. Crush

It seemed to Mike that there were three categories that middle schoolers fell into: having a hopeless crush on someone completely unattainable, refusing to have a crush and minding their own business, or getting into a relationship that was terribly unstable and not actually based off genuine feelings.

Dating in middle school had always baffled Mike. To him, the only benefit of a flimsy, predictable "relationship" was a few weeks worth of popularity before the couple either split in an excessively dramatic way or they tried stay strong and everyone quickly forgot about them. All of the ones he had watched crumble were so fake that they almost made him lose his hope in love in general.

The last girl he liked was in third grade. He doesn't even remember her name, just knows that she'd tried to tell the teacher one time that Troy was bullying him and Will on the playground. When that didn't work, she hung out with them for a couple days to keep them safe, before she got bored of their nerdy nature and moved onto another group. He remembers being mesmerized by her, only for her to break his heart when he realized she only associated with them because she had nothing better to do. And after that, he'd just kind of...shut down. He still found girls attractive, but none of them were catching his eye.

Maybe, somehow, his heart knew. Maybe it knew she was out there, that she was getting closer and it carved out her place in his heart before he'd even met her.

It took her running away and coming back to save his life for him to finally admit that he had a crush on her. But that was ridiculous, he'd only known her for a few days, how could he possibly already have feelings for her?

That was a lie. He knew how. He knew from the moment she sweetly bid him good night and the storm of butterflies that rushed through him, that she wasn't an ordinary girl and he didn't have ordinary feelings for her.

Still, saying he had a crush on her had never really clicked, especially after she was torn out of his life, taking his heart with her.

She was more than a label. A label had boundaries, restrictions, things it couldn't be. With El, their relationship and how he felt about her was so ambiguous and vast that it refused to fit within any box he tried to put around it. She was his friend and more than a friend. His crush and his soulmate. There simply was no word that could encompass it all. Except...except...

No, he wasn't there yet. He knew, some part of him knew truly how deep and bottomless what he felt for her was. But the thought scared him in a way, because right now, he doesn't even know if...if he'll ever see her again. And to dedicate his heart and soul to her forever without...without laying eyes on her ever again...

No. He shakes his head as if to fling that thought as far away from him as possible. She's out there. Without a doubt. He can...he can feel her, not in a creepy way but in a way where he just...knows.

It's Day 309 and he's found himself contemplating the juxtaposition between the soulful, passionate feelings he holds for the most amazing girl he'll ever meet and the sheer idiocracy that is middle school "romance".

Because none of them get it. None of the classmates chattering mindlessly around him in their math class truly understand what it means to care for someone so deeply that you would die for them. From the bits and pieces he's picked up, the popular girls to the left of him are convinced they've found their "one true man" and the jocks behind him are subtly trying to figure out how to earn their affections and it's all so petty that Mike can't do anything but roll his eyes and block them out the best he can.

That is, until the kid behind him taps him on his shoulder, jolting him out of his thoughts.

"Wheeler, who do you have a crush on?"

His eyes narrow just the tiniest bit, skeptical of the question, before he replies flatly, "I don't have a crush." Something twists in his gut as

he turns back around in an attempt to end the conversation, but it wasn't a lie per say. He didn't technically have one at the moment, his feelings had expanded well beyond that a long time ago.

But there was no way he was going to tell this jock that, it wasn't information he was planning on telling anyone, much less the younger brother of a high school quarterback he didn't care about.

Much to his annoyance, the subject isn't dropped after that. "Come on man, everyone has a crush. Just tell me." Mike all but scoffs at his plea, glancing back over his shoulder to glare at him in frustration. "Leave me alone, Brett." "Hey, I'm just curious," the boy responds. "Just wanna see who you've got your eye on."

Mike chooses not to comment on that, praying that this exchange is over. He goes back to the worksheet they've been handed and mistakenly thanks the heavens that he shut Brett up.

"Is she cute?"

He can't help it. His mind traitorously flashes to El's face, her sparkling eyes looking up at him, all wide and trusting, her soft cheeks accented by a smile gracing her lips, only for him.

She's freaking beautiful.

A soft heat rises to his cheeks and he tries to shove it back down, shove the flurry of butterflies back down into their cage but it's enough.

"Oh ho, you're blushing, you do like someone, I knew it! What's her name?"

Dang it. He hurriedly glances around, making sure none of the popular crowd was drawn to their conversation by his excited outburst, before lowering his voice and replying to him, his tone dark. "You don't know her. She...she doesn't go here."

This hurts. It hurts to have to craft a story for her, to make her sound all...normal. His El is anything but. She deserves to write her own story.

"Aw c'mon man, not even a name? Who knows, I know a lot of people! C'mon, what's it start with? A? B? C? D?"

Oh no. Not this. No, he doesn't want to do this, please not now. He feels the ache in his chest growing, faster and uglier and he clenches his teeth, willing himself to tune the airhead beside him out as he turns back to face the front of the classroom, but each letter pierces his mind and he braces himself for the inevitable.

"I? J?"

He misses her. He wants her. He *needs* her.

"K?"

He sucks in a breath, clenching his fist tightly around his pencil. Here it comes.

"L?"

He swallows, hard, the lump in his throat rushing up too fast for him to catch it, his heart torn between anger and despair. How dare he speak the name Mike had given her. It sounds absolutely terrible coming from him and he has the dangerous urge to slap the boy.

This doesn't go unnoticed. "Oh, it starts with an L?"

He can't take this. Visibly shaking with emotion, he throws down his pencil and hurries for the door, ignoring the looks from his classmates and his teacher. He'll deal with them later, but the grief of losing her is pouring forth without ceasing, scraping his heart in the process and he can't breathe and none of them *get it*.

He locks himself in a bathroom stall and weeps for the girl who he misses beyond words, her comforting eyes scorched into his mind's eye and he knows he would give anything just to see her looking at him like that again.

"Please. Mike." "I know kid, I know. I'll take you back to him."

She's fighting with everything she has to stay awake. Sleep is

beckoning her with a gentle hand and she wants so badly to give in, to slip into delicious nothingness, but she needs to see him. Her soul is crying out for him, to look into his eyes again, be held in his arms to make it real that she was no longer separated from him and that he wasn't going anywhere.

The whole car ride back to the Byers house is blurry, her vision growing fuzzy as her mind slowly begins to shut down but no, no, no, *Mike*.

She whimpers out his name, tears running swiftly down her cheeks as she watches the road, urging Hopper to go faster and he takes on hand off the steering wheel to place it on her shoulder, strong and steady. "Stay awake, El. He'll be waiting for you, just stay awake."

The sight of the Byers house coming into view sends a rush of relief through her and she gathers what little strength she has left to lift her head as the cruiser pulls into the driveway. When the door to the house opens, she can't help the sob that's ripped from her throat as Mike comes running out and jumps off the porch. Ignoring her physical capabilities right now, she fumbles for the door handle, unlocking it frantically, her hands shaking as she stumbles from the car.

"El!" He cries, his voice cracking and desperate. She can see him and only him as he rushes towards her and she forces her feet forward, needing him more than she ever has. Her steps are unstable but nothing right now could keep her from him. Her arms reach for him, and she barely hears her own voice calling his name before he's suddenly there and he's hugging her fiercely, one arm around her shoulders, one around her back and she just melts against him. His cheek rests against her hair, cocooning her in his arms and she just feels so safe and absolutely loved. Her arms wrap tightly around him, feeling his heartbeat, feeling each and every breath and he's alive, he's *alive* and she never, ever wants to let him go.

He holds her in a strong, tender embrace as everything comes rushing to the surface and she sobs, hands fisting in his shirt. She presses her face against his shoulder, sobbing for the time they'd lost, for the overwhelming feelings she holds for this boy, for the wound she had just closed, for the story that was ending and the story that was just

beginning.

She hears Mike's breath hitch and suddenly he's crying too, which only causes her tears to multiply. Nothing spoken out loud could possibly measure up to the weight and intimacy of this moment, so not a word is said as hands continue to cling desperately to one another, hearts pouring out a year's worth of unspoken emotions without a shred of shame between them.

After an eternity, her tears slowly subside and she slowly raises her head to look into the eyes of the one she cares for the most. And for the first time in 353 days, she gets to truly see him.

He's a mess, but she's never been so overjoyed to see anyone in her entire life. Their tear-soaked eyes lock and she's suddenly breathless, words she's dying to say getting trapped in her throat as her heart begins to race faster and faster. A watery smile tugs at the corner of her lips, matching the dopey grin that's lighting up his face, tears still dripping down his cheeks.

"You're here," he whispers gently, reverently. She lets out a breathless chuckle, squeezing him tighter. "I'm here," she replies, reassuring both him and herself. "I...I missed you, Mike. So, so much." Her throat constricts, her words choked as she falls farther and farther into the eyes she's been so desperately longing to see. Her body is screaming at her to rest, but she shoves it down as deep as she can, because the only thing that matters right now is Mike.

"El, I missed you too. More than I can explain, I...I don't think I can be away from you for very long ever again," he tells her, biting his lip and she knows, she just knows he's trying to keep his tears at bay. She shakes her head in agreement, knowing in her heart that the need to be by his side isn't going to go away now that they're back together. "I can't either, Mike," she replies quietly, relieved that he feels the same way. Unspoken sentiments pass between them as they share one more smile before he pulls her back into his arms and she goes willingly.

Of course, that's the exact moment her strength decides to give out and she's vaguely aware that she's falling before her vision tunnels dangerously and the world goes dark.

Everything hurts.

As her conscious swims to the surface, the one thing she becomes aware of is how much her body aches. Her head pounds in time to her heartbeat, the dull throbbing painful enough to make her immediately try to fall back asleep. Keeping her eyes shut, she attempts to make herself more comfortable by rolling onto her side, but her body protests, her muscles twinging and she groans, curling up in a ball, wincing as she does so.

"El?"

She freezes, the voice not one she was expecting, but the familiarity of it causes her to gasp, her eyes flying open as she remembered where she was and what had happened.

The first person she sees is Dustin, crouching by her bed with a big grin on his face and for a moment, she just stares at him blankly, trying to process what she was seeing. For almost a year she'd woken up to the same confining walls of the cabin, but now she's lying in a bed at the Byers' house with one of her best friends at her bedside. And wow, is it good to see him.

"Do you remember what happened?" He's asking her quietly, still unable to keep the friendly smile of his face and she nods noncommittally, giving him a tiny smile of her own as she struggles to keep her eyes open. "I'm happy to see you," she mumbles, still not quite piecing together what him being here means. "Yeah, we're all happy to see you too, we've missed our superhero," he tells her warmly.

We're happy. We. That includes...

A jolt of energy rushes through her and she's suddenly wide awake, her lungs straining as she gasps and Dustin's eyes go wide. "El, what's wrong?" he says hurriedly and she looks straight at him.

"Mike," she pleads, suddenly desperate for the ebony-haired boy she cares for so, so much. "Please, where's-" she starts to ask, struggling to push herself up, determined to go find him herself, but Dustin quickly

puts a hand on her arm, gently pushing her back down. "Shhh, no, you need to rest. Mike's down the hall making sure Will's okay. He spent the whole night in here with you, so trust me, Prince Charming's eager to see you too."

His words send a spark of affection down her spine, her heart bursting at the thought of Mike not wanting to leave her side all night and she can feel a smile begin to light up her face.

But something else Dustin said catches her attention. "Prince...Charming?" she asks timidly, inquisitively, wondering who that was and what it had to do with Mike. Dustin chuckles before replying easily. "Yeah, it's what you call the dashing hero in a fairy tale that always falls in love with the princess and she falls in love with him. And Mike may not be a dashing hero, but considering the way he looks at you and the major crush you seem to have on him..." he trails off, shrugging his shoulders and she somehow manages to grasp what he's implying, despite one unfamiliar word jumping out at her.

"Crush?" she asks him, almost in a whisper. Dustin's eyebrows raise and she shrinks back, afraid she asked about something she should already know, but he eventually laughs softly, shaking his head. "I think you'd rather have Mike explain that one, but I can try anyway. A crush is when...when you like someone so much that you just want to be by their side always and...and see them smile and make them laugh and hug them and spend time with them. Does that make sense?"

Someone that you...someone that you...like.

A friend?

No, not a friend. Someone like a...someone like a...

Oh.

Like a crush.

Like someone that you...

She knows the word. The big one that people on the television always

seemed to either shy away from or declare boldly. It's one she's mulled over in her head during many restless nights, missing the only person she was convinced she could ever feel that for, but she's too worn out to continue that contemplation now. Besides, she finally can be with that person again and she's beginning to worry that she might just die if she doesn't see him soon.

"Sorry, I know that must be a lot to take in," Dustin says, interrupting her thoughts. "We can talk more about it later, but I'm guessing there's someone you really want to see." He grins when she nods frantically and she watches as he pushes himself to his feet. "Good to see you, El!" he throws over his shoulder before he opens the door and disappears down the hallway, headed to Will's room.

Feeling the whispers of sleep trying to beckon her back under, she gingerly pushes herself up, scooting back to rest against the headboard, her shoulder against the wooden frame so she can face the door. She wants to be able to greet him properly, because he deserves nothing less.

Her heart leaps when she hears padded feet rushing down the hallway and she sits up just a little bit straighter, the anticipation flowing through her veins.

When he suddenly appears in the doorway, relief floods her system, the anxious knot in her stomach disappearing instantly. She smiles at him tenderly as he makes his way over to her, her hands reaching for him without a conscious thought. He grasps them in his own and kneels beside her bedside, his eyes deep and rich with emotion, his thumbs already rubbing small circles over the backs of her hands.

"Hi," she whispers, scooting just a little closer to him, basking in the glow of his presence, hoping she'll never, *ever* get tired of seeing him. "Hi," he whispers back with a chuckle, a soft grin turning up the corners of his mouth. "How're you feeling?" he asks, his brow creasing with worry, his eyes darting over her face to check for anything abnormal, sending a tingle up her spine.

She shrugs as much as she can. "Tired and sore," she replies. "But I'm glad to see you." Squeezing his hands earnestly, she watches as he bows his head, his smile growing and his eyes are gleaming when he

looks back up. "I'm so glad to see you too. I...I have so much I want to tell you, El. And so much I want to hear from you." "We have time," she tells him quietly, because they do. They have all the time in the world to be together and she honestly couldn't ask for anything more. "Yeah, we do now," he agrees, almost in a whisper.

"But first, can you stand? You should probably eat something, you've been out for a while. And...I can help you get cleaned up if you want?" A blush rises to his cheeks when he add that last part and her stomach flips in adoration, because of course his first concern is her well being. She nods, suddenly becoming aware of how gross she feels and he steps back to let her move her aching body out from under the covers.

After a few tedious minutes of Mike helping her get out of bed, they make their way down to the bathroom, with El explaining with a few short words that she wanted to get cleaned up first. She waves at Hopper when she catches his eye from where he's standing in the living room and he waves back, looking tired as heck, nodding to Mike as a greeting. He nods back and El breathes a sigh of relief, happy Hopper was letting them have this time alone together, something they both desperately need.

She heaves her tired body up on the counter when they get to the bathroom and watches as Mike closes the door behind him, leaving only a sliver between them and the rest of the house. She smiles at his thoughtfulness, before speaking up quietly. "You can close it," she tells him and he glances back at her. "You sure?" She nods, reaching for his hand, which he clasps without hesitation. "I'm with you," she tells him simply and he grins bashfully, before shutting the door all the way.

Without letting go of her hand, he bends down and opens the cabinet beside her feet, digging around until he finds a washcloth. When he has to release her in order to wet it under the sink, she takes the opportunity to glance at herself in the mirror behind her...

And almost gasps at what she sees. She looks *horrible*. Dried blood is caked to the lower half of her face, muddy red and flaking, trailing from her nose, around the corners of her lips and down her chin, staining her skin, which is the palest she's ever seen it. The shadows

around her eyes reflect the exhaustion she feels all the way to her bones, not to mention the makeup that's now smeared down to her cheekbones, making her look...haunted. The gel in her hair is still stubbornly trying to keep it slicked back, but after sleeping on it for a night, it's now starting to curl back up, the flyaways sticking up in all different directions.

She's a disaster.

"El?" He meets her gaze in the mirror and she turns back to look at him. His brow is furrowed as he searches her eyes with concern and she bows her head, intentionally glancing at the washcloth in his hand, suddenly self-conscious.

His free hand comes to cup her cheek and she looks back up at him, a question on the tip of her tongue but he beats her to it.

"Still pretty," he whispers softly, sending a wave of warmth through her and she fights to swallow the lump that forms in her throat.

Oh, how she'd been longing to hear those words again.

She knows the gratitude and affection is shining brilliantly on her face when the worry melts from his eyes and he smiles back at her. "Is it okay if I clean off your face?" he asks her sincerely, wringing out the cloth over the sink. "Yes," she whispers and sits up straighter, anticipation humming through her veins. Raising the wet cloth to her forehead, he begins to wipe away the sweat and grime using smooth, gentle strokes and with it, every fear and anxiety that had made a home in her mind over the past few days.

"Déjà vu," he says suddenly and she looks at him with confusion. "Dè...Déjà vu?" "Yeah, it's when you're doing or saying something that you've done before. You get a weird feeling, like you've gone back in time and you're living the same moment again." She smiles softly as he explains this to her, catching onto why he was bringing this up. "We've done this before," she says, echoing his words, remembering how he'd cleaned her up in his bathroom after that encounter with the mouthbreathers. He nods, looking her in the eye as he works and she's starting to believe that she could survive purely off of his gaze if she had to.

"I...I thought about that day a lot," he almost whispers, his face darkening marginally. "I should've protected you more than I did. I'm so sorry for what happened." She frowns, dumbfounded as to where this was coming from. If anything, *she's* the one that should be apologizing, but he barrels ahead anyway, his voice painfully somber. "I always wished...I dunno, I guess I'd always wished I'd done things differently." Her heart sinks even farther at his words and a flicker of heavy understanding passes between them, because she does too. With all of her heart, she wishes she would've realized what he meant to her sooner, expressed to him how much she needed and adored him earlier. Even though they couldn't have possibly foreseen what was to come...the regrets she carried still hurt and it saddens her to know he feels the same.

Her curiosity soon gets the better of her. "What would you have done differently?" she asks quietly, her stomach flipping when he gently presses his hand to the back of her neck, stabilizing her as he begins wiping away the dried blood off her chin. He's silent for a moment, evidently pondering her question before he blows out a breath and she scoots the tiniest bit closer to him, wanting him to know that she's here to listen and she won't judge what he has to say.

"I would've spent every possible moment by your side," he finally murmurs. "And...I would've kissed you earlier."

His face flushes a bright red and something inside her positively glows at his words. The air around them begins to hum with giddy affection as he sends her a bashful smile and she feels like she's about to combust from just how strongly she adores him. Her next words slip out of her without a second thought, fueled by her overwhelming affections, because he *needs to know*.

"I have a crush on you."

Time halts, and the unspoken weight behind her sentence slams into the both of them, breaking the wall they both hid their true feelings behind. The moment is breathless, suspended, as they fall deeper and deeper in the other's gaze, hearts pounding wildly, but she's never felt more at peace.

That is, until his eyes start welling up.

Alarm spikes in her when the first tear falls and she quickly raises her hands to cup his cheeks, worried that she had said the wrong thing or that...or that he doesn't feel the same way about her.

"Mike?" Her voice is timid, afraid and it seems to shake him out of the stupor he was in. "Sorry, I just..." he starts, before he pauses, sniffing and shaking his head, the tiniest smile inching onto his lips. "I have a crush on you too, El," he confesses, his heart in his gaze and her own heart leaps for joy, ecstatic that she had earned his affections in return. "Maybe it's something more, I don't know," he continues. "But I spent so long worrying that you didn't feel the same..." His voice trails off, cracking in the most heartbreaking way and she can't ignore her need to hold him any longer, so she wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him into an embrace and he wraps his own arms around her waist, burying his face against her shoulder.

She wants so badly to give him a reason never to doubt her feelings for him again. It's a daunting task, but she's more than willing to accept the challenge. For now, she whispers, "Please don't worry, Mike," and when she feels him smile, she knows it was enough.

"I've wanted to tell you that for a long, long time," he admits after a few moments have passed. She squeezes him, letting his statement sink into her and warm her heart before she whispers, "I have too," meaning it wholeheartedly. He lifts his head at that, his grin goofy and blissful and she knows right then and there that this? This is forever. Her and him. Him and her. Mike and El.

Her breath hitches when she recognizes the intensity in his gaze and just like that, the world around them disappears as he slowly, hesitantly begins to lean in, his eyes flickering to her lips. Her pulse begins to race deliciously, and she boldly lets her eyes slip shut as he gets closer and closer and she can feel his stuttered breath against her skin and—

Their lips meet and she could've sworn her heart exploded that very moment. She's been dreaming of this for 353 days and now...now her world has righted itself and she's never felt more complete in her whole life.

When he pulls back, his cheeks are flushed, but his eyes sparkle with

bliss and she can't help but smile wider than she has since she reunited with him the previous night, the elation within her buzzing happily under her skin.

She breaks the silence first. "Déjà vu," she quips playfully, knowingly and he chuckles, his grin growing even more. "Yeah, déjà vu," he agrees. "Only this time, we don't have to run for our lives." "Good," she whispers, one hand idly playing with the ends of his hair. "This time, I'm staying." "Good."

"El?" "Yes?" "I have a crush on you." "I have a crush on you, too, Mike."

But that's not the entire truth, is it?

Because El loves Mike.

And she can't wait for the day that she tells him.

32. Galaxy

A/N: You guys, I feel so bad, because this month's one shot was supposed to be a prompt submitted to me by a user...but February turned out to be one of the busiest months I've had in a very long time. I couldn't squeeze writing a one shot in there and I'm really sorry...but do not fret, that prompt will be out next month because life will finally slow down, and I'll make it the best it can possibly be, I *promise*.

For now, here's a cute little drabble I wrote for my Creative Writing class last semester! Enjoy!

For her, it starts with the black, vast, all-encompassing sheet of black. Underneath the sheet, there are cities. She says cities because she's been to two of them, so therefore there must be more. Layered underneath is her town, the one she both loves and despises. Within that are houses and within *that* is his house and within *that* is his lawn and within *that* is them. A boy and a girl laying on their backs, their hands hopelessly intertwined, their warmth a soothing contrast from the whispers of the evening summer breeze.

At a glance, one would not know exactly what they've seen, what they've survived or how hard they've fought to be with one another. But none of that matters right now, because she's *curious*. She knows there's more to the houses and the towns and the cities and the great black sheet that covers it all. Without a word, the girl had tugged the boy outside and pointed upward with a small smile and he *understood* because he always did. And now she's curled up against his side as the voice she's come to know and adore immensely builds a world for her.

He starts small and creates layer upon layer upon layer and she can't stop smiling. Because, suddenly there are people with names in the house and the houses are in a town she knows and in a state she doesn't and all of a sudden, there are fifty (fifty!) of them and she's excitedly stating that she wants to visit them all and he's chuckling in agreement, affectionately nudging her with his shoulder.

But he wasn't done, because now those states are making up a country and that country is melding with two other countries to create a continent and she's wide-eyed, breathless because he's *still* not done and suddenly there are more continents with even more countries, continents separated by *water* of all things and he makes a promise that she'll see the ocean someday.

Before she can blink, suddenly the continents and the ocean are on a thing called a planet and now there are more planets, planets that stretch into the deep black sheet-the deep black *sky* and the planets are hanging in space and space is dotted with *stars* and this is just their solar system and suddenly there are more systems and the systems make up galaxies and the galaxies make up universes and and and it's all so *big* and she can't breathe and she feels so small and he squeezes her hand tenderly because he *gets it*.

She doesn't want to come crashing back to earth, but when she does, his house, his lawn, *him*, it's all still there. Her smile is wobbly and he asks if she's okay. She is, but she knows why he's concerned that she wouldn't be, because her world had only been the town for thirteen years. But she is and she's overwhelmed and she's *happy*, because she knows what she's been blessed to be a part of now and she wants to see it *all*. But as the boy and the girl fall silent, it occurs to her that her world isn't made up of countries and planets and galaxies.

Because her entire world is laying on the grass beside her, with hair as black as the night sky above.

33. Thank You

A/N: This one shot was written for tank03, who submitted an awesome prompt idea, which turned into this! I hope you enjoy it!

Also, the freaking ST3 trailer completely wrecked me and I'm still in shock over everything that we got, the Mileven kiss notwithstanding! Soooooooooooooooooooooo absolutely pumped for the season ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

El hadn't exactly been planning on being soaked as she walks into the Wheeler house that Friday afternoon, but she couldn't care less as she and the boy she loves stumble through his front door, still giggling playfully at their antics during the walk over.

They honestly hadn't expected it to start raining on their trek from Dustin's to Mike's, but she whipped out the umbrella she had in her backpack the second she felt a raindrop and Mike has quickly joined her underneath it as the spring shower descended upon Hawkins. They'd strolled arm in arm in a comfortable silence, enjoying the sound of the soft rain around them, when she'd suddenly noticed the mischievous glint in his eyes.

"What're you thinking?" She doesn't ask it in an affectionate way...no, she's seen that look enough times to know that he's got an idea and he's going to follow through with it unless she explicitly forbids him to do so. He's plotting something and while she should be worried, she's curious, wondering what he's cooked up this time.

"Do you trust me?" he asks with a grin and she squeezes his arm where she's holding on to him. "Always," she replies, softening at the way his face lights up, before he quickly rearranges his features to look innocent. "Good," he says nonchalantly and he continues walking as if he'd said nothing, leaving her slightly baffled. She watches him carefully, but after a few minutes, she lets it go, figuring he's just planning something for later.

Which turns out to be a mistake, because as soon as she stops watching him, he tugs them closer to the sidewalk where the

rainwater is running by the curb. She frowns as they approach the flowing water, opening her mouth to warn him, when suddenly, he jumps, so quickly she almost doesn't catch it, and lands directly in the stream, splashing both of them.

"Mike!" she shrieks, feeling the water seeping through her clothes and the grin on his face shows he totally meant to do that. She kicks at the stream without a second thought, sending a wave towards him and the shocked look on his face is priceless. She throws back her head and *laughs*, and suddenly, they're chasing each other down the street, jumping into every puddle they find and splashing the other as much as they can. The umbrella comes down quickly and is hastily shoved back into El's backpack, leaving them completely exposed to the falling rain, but she could care less as she dodges the splash Mike had just sent her way with a giggle, stomping in the next puddle to get her revenge.

They're drenched by the time they get to Mike's house, but she's filled with so much joy and laughter that she could care less and one look at Mike's face shows he feels exactly the same.

"Mom, we're home! Could you bring us some towels, please?" he hollers into the house as they stand gingerly in the entryway, kicking off their wet shoes and sharing playful glances as they wait for her response.

"Of course honey, why..." Her response trails off as she rounds the corner and sees the two of them standing there sheepishly. "Oh, you're soaked! Stay there," she exclaims and rushes upstairs. "This is your fault," El teases him once she's gone, nudging his shoulder and he chuckles. "Hey, I never heard you protesting," he tells her, taking a step closer. She shakes her head, grinning like a fool. "I had fun," she tells him softly, the words just for him. "I've missed the rain." "I've missed you," he responds softly and she sighs, matching his step as she lifts her chin and he lowers his lips to her, pecking her once, twice before Karen comes flying back down the stairs, unceremoniously interrupting their moment.

"Here, dry yourselves off," she tells them, handing them both a towel. "And Eleanor, here's some dry clothes, feel free to go change in the basement." "Thank you Mrs. Wheeler," she says, taking the clothes

and turning to Mike. "Meet you down there?" "Yeah, sure. We can watch a movie or something," he responds and she reaches out, squeezing his hand before she heads for the basement door.

It's only when she's in the bathroom that she notices the clothes Mrs. Wheeler had handed her.

She gasps softly as she unrolls the navy blue sweater and the gray sweatpants to match, feeling a lump form in her throat. She hasn't seen these since back in '83 and it's startling to be thrown back to that moment when a young boy gave her her first comfortable pair of clothes ever. Rarely does she dwell on the events that transpired over that week—excluding the moments with Mike, of course. With a sentimental sigh, she tugs her top off and pulls the sweatshirt on, finding it sweet that he had kept this outfit lying around after all this time.

It shocks her just how familiar the shirt feels. She'd worn it for a little less than three days and yet, slipping it on and feeling its delicate softness wrap around her body, surrounding her in his scent, seems so *right*, like she should always be wearing this. Numbly, she pulls on the gray fleece sweatpants, amused at how they barely reach her ankle.

Amusement quickly turns to...to an emotion she barely recognizes, but it overwhelms her swiftly and silently as it occurs to her that she had grown. She knew she had, biologically it was impossible for her not to, but to think that this used to be a little too big and now...

When she stands up, she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror and the small part of her that was expecting to see a scared, naive child with a shaved head reels, because the person looking back at her is not scared or lost or hopeless.

She's strong. Independent.

Beautiful.

She's weeping before she can even think to stop it, tears pouring down her cheeks as she suddenly remembers the person she used to be, the person who clung to these clothes like they were the only

thing in the world that wouldn't hurt her. Knowing she very well could still be that fragile and wide-eyed girl frightens her and she grips the edges of the sink abruptly, praying all this wasn't some grand illusion that would end in an instant, too good to possibly be true.

How on earth had she gone from being worthless and belonging to an evil mastermind to a happy, carefree adolescent with a life she adored, one with a family, friends, a home and...

"Hey El? I was thinking we could..."

Mike.

His head pokes through the crack in the doorway, his sentence dying off as he catches sight of her and she shoves down a sob at the way his face softens, his eyes all tender and warm, reflecting every emotion she's feeling in his gaze.

She bites her lip as he steps into the bathroom and comes to stand behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and placing a soft kiss on the skin right underneath her ear. He slowly looks back up, meeting her gaze in the mirror and she sinks back into his arms when she sees he's just as affected by this as she is.

For an infinite moment, there are no words, memories heavy in the air around them. She breaks the spell first, needing to ask him something, trusting completely that he'll give her an honest answer.

"Why did you save me?"

He blinks, his brow creasing slightly, before he answers her. "Why wouldn't I have saved you?"

"Mike, you brought a kid...a *weirdo* you didn't know into your house. That's...very dangerous. What were you thinking?" she asks incredulously. He shakes his head, squeezing her just a little bit tighter. "I wasn't. To be honest, it never crossed my mind that it wasn't a good idea. You just..." he stalls, searching for his next words and she turns herself around in his arms so she can face him, linking her fingers behind his neck as she waits patiently for him to finish his

thought.

"It's just always felt like we're connected, you know?" he says in a much softer tone than before. "I couldn't explain it, but it just felt like you were supposed to come with me. There was...there was something about your eyes that pulled me in, I guess. I could tell you were scared and lost...but I saw strength and kindness in them too." He skims a thumb across her cheek, wiping away her tears and she shivers. "They were beautiful," he all but whispers.

She ducks her head, something inside her glowing at his words. A pair of lips presses against her forehead and her smile grows so wide, she knows he can see it.

"They *were* beautiful?" she teases him as she raises her head up, reaching down to link their fingers together and heading for the door. "Mmhm...and getting more beautiful everyday," he tells her as she leads them back into the basement. She glances back at him, trying to send a pointed look, but she knows her cheeks are flushed and the effect is lost on him as he grins.

She tugs him into the blanket fort, scooting back so he can fit his tall, lanky frame inside the small space. It's quiet for a moment once they get situated as she gathers up her thoughts, exhaling slowly as she wonders how best to articulate them.

"You're right, though," she starts, taking both of his hands and inching a tiny bit closer to him. "I was scared and lost. Did you know I'd never been out in the rain before?" He shakes his head, his eyes growing wider and she nods seriously. "It was...so cold. I'd never been so cold..."

Not even the bath they'd lower her into had froze her as much as the storm had that night. They always kept the lab relatively warm and her showers had always been hot and steamy, so the shock of the drops that pelted her skin was almost enough to make her run back to Benny's.

But she couldn't do that. That would've been suicide. So, drenched, shivering and frightened, she ran and ran and ran until she heard voices that caused her to stop in her tracks. She inched closer and

closer until suddenly she was standing in a beam of light and their story began.

"And I was miserable," she whispers as the biting cold memory fades. "I thought...I thought I'd never be warm or happy ever again. And then..." She trails off, bashfully looking back up at him to see that his eyes are full of understanding, because he knows.

A sudden thought occurs to her. How much does he know, really? How many ways does he know he saved her in? How well does he actually understand what he did that night? Does his brilliant, yet humble mind know the magnitude of his actions? Has she ever bothered to thank him?

Oh no. Has she *ever* properly thanked him?

Hysteria rises in her and she can't stop the tears that slip down her cheeks, barely registering that the boy across from her is frantically asking if she was okay, reaching for her as if he's done it a million times before, because he has, and can't he see how impossibly caring he is and the life that heart of his built for her? Doesn't he get it?

"Mike," she sobs as she crumples against him, into the arms that have been wide open for her since the second she stepped foot in this house. Vaguely, she hears, "El, you're okay, please talk to me," so she does, letting a jumbled mess of words spill out into the world as her mind races to catch up with the weight of the gratitude that sits on her chest.

"Mike, you could've l-left me there. You could've moved on...no, you *should've* moved on a-and kept looking for W-Will, because you were out there for *him*. And I...I think I would've gone b-back. They would've found me and..."

The thought terrifies her. She wouldn't have been able to run forever like Kali did. She wasn't that strong and when they caught her, they never would have let her go again.

"And I n-never would've known what an Eggo was or what it's like to have hair or how soft these clothes are or wh-what the stars look like. I wouldn't be able to talk like this or know how to write or know

what music sounds like or what a movie is." She sucks in a shuddering breath and he squeezes her tight, pressing his cheek against her hair. "And...and I'd never get to be held like this o-or kissed or tucked in at n-night or hold someone's hand..." His hand wraps around hers firmly, resting it against his chest beside her head and she forces herself to keep going. "I never would've had a friend. Or a f-family. Or a happy life. Or a h-home. But M-Mike," she raises her head to look him in the eye, finding them brimming with tears. "You were stupid enough to bring me back here and n-nothing I can ever say or do will be able to tell you how th-thankful I am that you built me this fort and h-hid me from the bad men and gave me a l-life. Don't you understand what you did? You gave me a *h-home*."

"El, I-"

She cuts him off with a kiss that holds more meaning and passion than she can ever explain and he kisses her back with a tender desperation that takes her breath away, making her feel infinitely small amidst the sheer enormity of their feelings for one another.

She's shaking when she pulls back, clutching onto him with everything she has as her gaze slowly goes up to meet his to find that he's just as much of a mess as she is. Her heart aches as she watches him bite back a sob and she goes kiss him again, but his words stop her.

"I don't think y-you understand what you did either," he murmurs, his voice thick with tears and she furrows her brow. "Mike, I haven't done hardly anything," she protests, shaking her head, but he scoffs in disbelief, effectively silencing her rebuttal.

"I jumped off a freaking cliff. I shouldn't have survived that, El, I was stupid enough to willingly jump to my death. Do you understand what would've happened?" Her sobs come back with a vengeance, because she does, she does understand, but he continues anyway, his voice dropping almost to a pained whisper. "I would've...I would've been pulled out of that lake like...like Will's fake body was. Remember that? That...that would have been me, if you...if you hadn't..."

It breaks her. Imagining it being his body being lifted out of the

water completely destroys her and she cries out at the image, falling back against him and clinging to him with every ounce of strength she has, her tears soaking her face.

She can't lose him, she suddenly realizes. Ever. Death is inevitable but she swears to herself in that moment that she'll delay it for as long as she possibly can because she needs him. Maybe fifteen is too young to be making these decisions, but screw it, he's a part of her now, has been since their eyes first met on that fateful night.

His arms are tight, strong around her and she lets go completely, feeling more vulnerable than she has in a while, but letting her thoughts and her emotions be what they are—sharp and overwhelming. She cries for the what-could-have-been's, the unknowns of the lives they could've lead without the other. She cries for the possibility that she maybe never could've met this wonderful boy and the possibility that he could've left her out in the rain. She cries for the warmth he surrounds her with, for the very fort they're sitting in, the very clothes she's wearing.

Her tears are for their impossible journey, their beautiful story, their love that burns brighter than the sun, moon and stars.

He honestly hadn't meant for his words to hurt her so much. His intentions are never to hurt her, period, but the reality of what could've happened that day was one that hadn't really sunk in until she disappeared when he spent night after night combing through his memories of her. It was...intense, to say the least and her reaction when he'd painted the picture of his possible death had gone straight to his heart, tearing it open from the inside out, but he had a feeling she just needed to cry everything out, so he holds her tighter still and let his own tears come.

A memory from that day suddenly comes back to him, recalling the words El had said to him as they'd dusted themselves off and gotten ready to head back to his house.

She'd tugged on his sleeve as they began walking away and he remembers looking back into her warm, chocolate eyes to find them filled with worry. He'd watched as she pointed back to the cliff he

had just fallen off of without letting go of his sleeve before turning back to him. "Never again," she had whispered fiercely and he'd solemnly nodded, reassuring them both that he'd never, ever do that again, although the weight of his actions was still lost on him.

Swallowing thickly, he lowers his lips to El's ear, kissing her temple before whispering those words back to her. "Hey, 'never again', remember? That's what you told me and I...I promise I'll never do that again." His sentiment seems to have the desired effect on her, because her sobs die down to mere whimpers, but her body still shakes uncontrollably against him and he cradles her face against his neck, playing with her brown wavy locks ever so gently.

He thinks it's the hair that did it for him. Seeing her standing in the same outfit she had worn the night he met her did something to him, causing an explosion of pride and affection in his chest, because she had grown. She wasn't stuck as the frail, naive child he'd pulled out of the rain and while he adored that child immensely, who she was now was the girl he'd fallen in love with—brave, resilient, strong. Happy. She was safe and happy and that's more than he could ever want in life.

El's shaking voice breaks him out of her thoughts, but he continues to stroke her hair as he listens to her. "Mike, you jumped because of D-Dustin. I know you love your friends, but I...I don't want you to put yourself in danger b-because of me. Ever."

Her statement startles him a little bit, because he's always prepared to risk his life for her. He supposes that he never, ever wants her to risk herself for him, but it's too late for that, his thoughts remind him wryly. It's a part of who they are—to look death in the face if it only means the other would get away safe and sound.

"El, I already did," he begins gently and he feels her stiffen. "You were unconscious, but that night at the school...you were on the ground and the bad men came around the corner and I knew, I just knew the one in the middle was the worst one of all. So I stood in front of you and told him that he would have to kill me first if he was going to take you." "Mike!" she cries indignantly, but he pushes on. "And I'd do it again in a heartbeat. But...as much as I hate it, I know you'd do the same thing. You have done the same thing. You...you put yourself in

front of the freaking *demogorgon* for us."

He can tell she stopped listening as soon as he told her what he had done, but he hopes she'd registered his rationale anyway. His sacrifices were minuscule compared to hers, but of course, he knew her and he knew there was no way she'd ever agree with that. And she definitely wouldn't right now, because she's still staring at him with the disbelief swirling in her eyes.

"You stood up to the bad men? How stupid are you?" He grins. "Stupidly in love."

The way her face goes blank, a smile she tries to hide tugging up the corners of her mouth makes him chuckle and he leans forward to rub his nose with hers affectionately. She lets out a content sigh, before her eyes soften and meet his and he feels like she's gazing into his very soul, but he doesn't mind, because it's all hers, every inch.

"Mike?" "Mhm?" "Thank you for saving me." Pulling her closer, he rests his forehead against hers, before whispering, "You're welcome."

"And thank you for saving my life more times than I can count. Thank you for coming back." He kisses her nose. "Thank you for understanding me." He kisses her forehead. "Thank you for trusting me." He kisses her cheek. "Thank you for believing in me." He kisses her temple. "Thank you for loving me." He kisses her lips.

Her finger comes up to press against his mouth when they part, silencing any further outpourings of gratitude. She smiles, cupping his cheek with her hand and strokes it lovingly, his heart singing as she whispers to him.

"Thank you for always being my Mike."

34. Sleep

Thoughts were a scary thing in the earliest hours of the morning.

She had always told him that he thought too much, that he let his mind trap him sometimes and he could never really just *be*. Her comments were not out of spite, or accusing by any means, they were merely observational, a tactic to tug him back down to earth when he stared off into space for too long or had paced for worrying amounts of time.

It was something he wished he could just shut off. He often wished he could silence the voices in his mind at will and only summon them when they were needed. He even caught himself a few times wishing he couldn't think at all.

He tried to stay above the rising wave of images, ideas, feelings as much as he could, fighting it down, living "in the moment" as his mom would call it. Because despite how often he found himself drifting, the life in which he had found himself in was truly a captivating one and one he enjoyed very much.

This moment, for instance, is one he should be enjoying.

But he's drowning instead.

It's just the him and El in his basement and nothing has ever felt more right. Both her parents and his parents know she's here and sure, there was plenty of arm-twisting to get her here, but all that mattered was that she was in fact here. She was here and content and alive and beautiful.

They set up in the blanket fort as usual, both their sleeping bags left unzipped, their pillows propped up slightly against the wall. She had started fading fast during their second movie of the night, his fingers in her hair and his gentle kisses on her scalp lulling her swiftly to sleep. He's watched her doze off enough times to know when she was about to hit the point of being completely out and so, knew when to tenderly nudge her awake, whispering that they should move to where their sleeping bags were waiting for them. She'd murmured

her agreement, clutching his hand as he shut off the television and followed him to their special place, the one she will forever feel attached to. He had climbed in first, slipping into his sleeping bag and knowing she wasn't far behind as he settled down among the pillows and blankets. His heart swelled as he reached for her and she smiled sleepily, crawling over to him like a moth drawn to the flame and she nestles herself against him, resting her head on his chest and throwing an arm across his torso, holding him tight as she exhales, letting her body sink against his. His skin buzzes in delight as he secures her in his arms and the last thought he has before he closes his eyes is how unbelievably lucky he is that his El curled up beside him.

Only, his thoughts don't stop there.

In an instant, they multiply, growing sharp and jagged, humming incessantly around his head and he grits his teeth, determined not to let them win, not this time. He tries counting his breaths, he tries focusing on the girl he's holding, he tries letting his mind tell himself a story, but nothing works as the minutes tick by.

And as the minutes turn into hours, he finds himself getting more and more restless as his thoughts get louder and louder, filling his head with a cacophony of noise and he squirms, knowing El is in deep, deep sleep by now and there's no way he's going to wake her up.

Until suddenly, somewhere around three in the morning, he can't take it anymore. He has to get out. He's suffocating, his bones aching from staying in one position for so long, his muscles tense and rigid, the walls of the fort instantly feeling too confining, too small, too menacing and, loathing that he has to do this, he slowly extracts his arms from around El, slipping out of her embrace as slowly and as gently as he can. She whimpers softly when her arm lands on his empty sleeping bag and it hurts his heart, but she doesn't wake up. Exhaling silently in relief, he crawls out of the fort, stretching out his tight muscles before heading for his basement door.

Promising himself that he'll come back long before El will wake up, he slips out into the night, shutting the door quietly behind him and walks a few feet before plopping down on the grass. As he lets the night air fill his lungs, he smiles, closing his eyes as everything seems to slow down. His thoughts, his racing heartbeat, the turning of the

earth, all of it is suddenly gentle, soothing, simple. He lets the infinite size of the universe shrink him down until he feels almost insignificant, his anxiety practically nonexistent to the great vastness of the world.

He doesn't want to leave. He doesn't want to go back to a place where his thoughts will suffocate him mercilessly. He needs a better solution than running away from them, but he doesn't want to think of one, because he's done too much thinking for one night.

His concept of time has been warped and he loses track of how long he sits out there, but he could care less, because he craves the silence and the peace the quiet night gives him. Maybe he should just sleep out here...

Suddenly, a worried cry of his name pierces the tranquility of the moment, and he jumps, his heart rate spiking. Oh no, *El*. He hurriedly gets to his feet, running back to the basement door, chiding himself for leaving her all alone without telling her. Stupid, stupid, stupid...

His hand lands on the doorknob, but it's flung open when he goes to turn it, and he tenses before his eyes land on his girlfriend, wide-eyed but still sleepy. She's absolutely adorable.

"I'm sorry." He finds himself apologizing before he's even thought about it and she shakes her head fervently. "It's okay, Mike. What were you doing?" He shrugs, his gaze dropping to the ground as she waits patiently for his answer. "I couldn't sleep," he mumbles finally and he can clearly see the skepticism in her face when he looks back up to her. He chuckles slightly, before clarifying. "No, like, I *actually* couldn't sleep," he tells her honestly and she nods thoughtfully, taking a step toward him and closing the door slightly behind her. "Why?" "My mind wouldn't shut off, I guess," he replies. "Too many thoughts, questions, voices, images...they just wouldn't stop."

She absentmindedly takes her bottom lip between her teeth as she continues to look at him and he shuffles his feet, hating to see the look of concern on her face.

The smile he puts on doesn't feel entirely fake as he attempts to dodge her worries and show her that he's definitely completely fine,

but when her face brightens with an idea, he realizes she's going to try and fix this anyway.

"Do you want to sleep out here tonight?"

The idea should sound more absurd than his mind processes it to be, but right then, nothing sounds better and he nods sheepishly. She beams at him, making his sleepy heart flutter and he catches her wrist as she turns to dart back inside, pulling her closer to press his lips to her cheek quickly. She's blushing as she retreats back into the basement and he hears her rustling around before she appears carrying both their sleeping bags, their pillows and a blanket.

A quick glance at the clock on the table behind her shows that it's nearly one in the morning and the guilt creeps in as they take a few steps over to the grass and begin laying everything down. "El, you need to sleep too, I don't want to keep you up," he tells her quietly, not wanting his disruptive sleep cycle to interfere with hers. She simply shrugs, giving him a sleepy smile as she replies, "I'd rather be with you out here. I don't like not sleeping beside you."

It's a casual statement, but it's one that means more to him than he can ever explain. Having her sleep by his side makes him feel complete and he can't deny that twinge of loneliness when he can't feel her beside him.

And perhaps that's what led her out here, he supposes as he slips into his sleeping bag, turning on his side to watch her do the same. Perhaps she needs to feel his presence as she rests just as much as he needs to feel hers.

With that thought humming in his mind, he scoots closer to her, wrapping an arm around her waist as hers rests on his shoulders. "Thank you," he whispers, leaning forward to press a soft kiss to her forehead. "Anytime," she whispers back. "Now sleep. I've got you." He nods, so thankful that she isn't going to leave his side and, with this reassurance, the warmth of her body and the whispering breeze around them, he lets his eyes slip shut, his mind quiet and at peace and it isn't long before he succumbs to blissful slumber.

Knowing Mike like the back of her hand is something El prides herself on. So it doesn't come as a surprise to her when she can pinpoint the exact moment that he finally falls into a deep sleep. His breaths even out, his face droops almost imperceptibly and the tension he's been carrying in his muscles slips away, allowing him to relax. She lets out a breath she didn't know had been trapped in her lungs when she sees he's finally getting some rest.

Sighing contently, she snuggles further into his arms, closing her eyes and waits for sleep to take her too.

Except, it never does. Because every time Mike shifts or makes a noise, her eyes fly back open, watching him intently for any signs that he still can't sleep. She's worried for him. That big brain of his needs time to relax and recover from the day, and if it doesn't, he wears himself down way too quickly for her liking.

And that's how she spends the night. Anxiously watching the sleeping boy beside her, pushing her own needs to rest aside in favor of making sure he's okay.

Eventually, he awakes when the sun slips over the horizon, the first beams of morning light warming up his skin and coaxing him slowly back to consciousness. She's been dozing occasionally and her eyes snap open when he stirs, her insides fluttering as she watches him inhale deeply and scrunch up his face before he dreadily opens his eyes. "El?" he murmurs, his eyebrows knitting together as he stares at her blankly, trying to piece together where he was. She smiles, lifting a hand to run it gently through his hair. "Good morning. We fell asleep outside, remember?" He finally looks away from her then, glancing around at their surroundings before chuckling softly. "Right," he says, shaking his head and turning back to her. "Thank you. I slept really well." His point is emphasized as he yawns and she giggles. "Good, I'm glad you did. I didn't like seeing you...anxious." He shrugs, scooting closer to her and kissing her forehead in a way that holds a thousand meanings and she understands each one of them.

He's apologizing for dragging her into this, but he's grateful too, grateful that she cares about him so much and is looking after his wellbeing. He knows she's worried about him and he can't stop that,

because he's worried about her too, but he's fearful that maybe she's worrying too much.

He pulls back slowly and she sighs, sinking back into his arms and letting the moment wash over her. "Breakfast?" he eventually whispers after they've laid in peace for a while and she nods enthusiastically, knowing Karen Wheeler can make a mean batch of blueberry pancakes.

It's only when she stands up and almost falls back down, her head reeling dangerously, her vision growing fuzzy for a moment that she suddenly realizes what a bad idea staying up to watch him was. But it was worth it, she convinces herself as she wipes the sleep hastily from her eyes. Mike slept and that's all that matters.

El is not surprised in the slightest when she's absolutely exhausted the following night. She's napped intermittently throughout the day once Hopper came to pick her up from the Wheeler's, self-proclaiming it a "lazy day", despite the homework she still has to do. But despite that, she's relieved when she climbs into bed after bidding Hopper goodnight, flicking the lights off telepathically and sighing as her head sinks down into the pillows, her comforter draped warmly around her. Her thoughts begin to dim and she slowly feels herself slipping, slipping, slipping...

'What if Mike can't sleep tonight again?' her mind suddenly whispers traitorously and her eyes fly open as worry seeps into her heart. That...that can't happen, he needs sleep, he's growing too much for him not to get rest. Logically, she knows his sleep patterns are completely out of her control at this point and it's not like she has magical powers that would make him fall asleep if he wasn't already, but, according to the clock beside her bed, it's already 11:30 at night. Meaning her thoughts are now officially way out of proportion and she has no choice but to believe their crazy lies.

She tosses and turns throughout the entire night, staring into nothingness as she pictures Mike, restless and exhausted as his mind churns relentlessly, an image that only worries her even more.

The last numbers she remembers seeing on her clock are 3:47, before she suddenly wakes to Hopper's fist pounding on her door, his booming voice declaring that she had ten minutes to get ready before they had to leave for school. Gasping sharply as she launches herself out of bed, she dresses herself as quickly as possible, triple checking the time to make sure Hopper wasn't just messing with her and rushes out to the living room. She nabs the toasted Eggo Hopper hands her as he's pulling on his coat and she thanks him with a nod, before she's pulling on her own jacket and swinging her backpack over her shoulders.

She nearly collapses in her seat when they finally get to the car, her hands shaking and her heart pounding wildly at the sudden chaotic start to her morning. Hopper's throwing her disapproving looks as he navigates them towards the school, but she barely pays them any attention, because her concern over Mike's wellbeing is back and she fidgets with her backpack strap as she runs through a list of everything that could've gone wrong for him last night and all the ways she could've been there to help him, but wasn't. She chides herself for taking it this far without even knowing what the true outcome of last night was, but, for some reason, it's not working today. She can't get the worry out of her head, no matter how hard she tries.

She shoots Hopper a wane smile when they pull up to the drop off lane, but she can tell he sees right through it. Sighing, he studies her for a moment longer, before nodding towards the school. "Have a good day, kid. Call the station if you need anything," he tells her gruffly, the concern creasing his brow, making her smile for real. "Thanks Dad. See you this afternoon," she tells him quietly, before opening the door and hopping out onto the pavement.

Mike. She needs to find Mike. He's probably fine, but she just...has to check, make sure he isn't putting on a brave face for the rest of the world to cover the fact that he's tired as hell.

She finds the party gathered at Max's locker, their laughter ringing down the hallways and the tightness of her chest lifts at the sound of her friends. They wave as she approaches and she smiles, bidding them good morning as she wraps her arms around her boyfriend, grinning when she feels him plant a kiss on the top of her head,

squeezing her tight.

As the conversation turns to complaints about the history test Will and Dustin have second period, she nudges Mike, her heart fluttering as he glances down with an expectant smile. "How are you?" she whispers, hoping she doesn't sound overly concerned. He shrugs casually, his face open as he replies, "Not bad. A little tired, but you know, that's how Mondays go."

The warning bells that go off in her head are jarring as her stomach drops upon hearing her worst fear concerned. Oh no, he's trying to sugarcoat things, this is exactly what she didn't want. "No Mike, how are you *actually*?" she asks with a little more persistence and is rewarded with genuine confusion. "I'm fine, El. Really," he says, his brow creasing as he studies her more closely, no doubt wondering where this was coming from. "How are you?" "Good," she answers dismissively, not caring in the slightest bit that her body aches and her eyes were heavy from her lack of sleep. He doesn't need to worry about her.

She watches him closely throughout the day, feeling a little bad for jumping to conclusions when she doesn't have a definite answer yet and by the time the bell rings and she meets him out by the bike racks, her uncertainty has quieted and she soon finds herself forgetting about the whole thing, swept up in the antics of her friends as they relax in the Byers' living room.

She's content as she goes to bed that night, Mike's farewell kiss still buzzing on her lips and for the first time in two nights, she feels herself drifting into the beautiful slumber she's been deprived of the last two nights.

That is, until 'What if Mike actually was faking it today?' floats through her thoughts and it's official, she's wide awake with barely any hope of returning back to sleep. Great.

By the next morning, she's more annoyed than anything. She managed a whopping four hours of sleep last night and matched with the three she got the night before and the one she got that night with Mike, she's exhausted and her mood has severely plummeted.

The first part of the day is a blur. Her mind is purely focused on maintaining the illusion that she's perfectly fine and she finds herself continuously having to dig down deep to find the last of her energy just to make it through her first few classes. No one says anything, so it must be working, she concludes. She's fine. Everything's gonna be fine.

She meets Dustin after her sixth period Biology class, taking a breath and steeling herself for his boundless energy, before approaching him with a smile. "Hey El! How's it going?" he asks her, grinning widely and she shrugs as they begin walking to to their next class. "Good," she replies shortly. "How's your day?" "Great, you should've been there during our English class...your boyfriend fell asleep in the middle of our reading time, I laughed so hard when Mrs. Hartman woke him up!"

El blinks. "He...he what?" "Yeah, one minute he was reading, and the next, his head was on his desk and he was practically snoring!" Dustin chuckles as he relays his tale, but El barely hears him as her stomach drops and her thoughts come to a halt.

He really was faking it. He hasn't been sleeping well for who knows how long and what has she done about it? Nothing. She's done absolutely nothing to help him.

Distantly, a voice whispers how she wouldn't have been able to help him even if she did know, but it's not enough to stop the tidal wave of disappointment and uneasiness that hits her and she tunes Dustin out for the rest of their walk, already plotting when she can sit Mike down and persuade him to tell her the truth.

The opportunity presents itself that afternoon when Mike suggests they have a movie night tonight. "You know, hang out, stuff ourselves with food and cuddle while we watch whatever you want to," he tells her brightly as they meander towards his bike, their connected hands swinging lazily between them and she can't help but smile at him. "Yes please. Could...could we maybe do it at the cabin?" He frowns, cocking his head and she holds her breath. "Wouldn't Hopper be there, watching our every move?" "No, he's staying at the station late tonight," she replies, secretly thanking the stars that this is all lining up.

Because she finally is going to ask him how he's really been doing this week like she should've done earlier and while Mike's basement feels more like home than their secluded cabin in the woods, something about being away from all prying eyes to have this conversation puts her at ease.

"Yeah, that sounds good to me then," he says, shrugging his shoulders and she has to hold herself back from sighing in relief. "I'll be there at...six?" he suggests as they finally reach his bike and he bends down to unlock it while she nods in affirmation. "Six works," she replies, bouncing on her toes as she waits for him to finish. She approaches the bike once he's finished, waiting for him to mount it, but he pauses suddenly as he stands back up, glancing at her warily. "What?" she asks maybe too defensively and his brow creases in the most subtle way.

"El, are you okay?" His voice is overflowing with concern and her heart freezes. "Yes," she says with as much confidence as she can muster, deflecting his worries by throwing them back onto him. "Are you?" "Yeah, of course." The hurried nature of his response leaves a sour taste in her mouth, but she drops the subject, choosing instead to climb onto the bike behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her lips to his cheek in silent reassurance.

The ride to the cabin is a quiet one and he drops her off with the promise to return that evening. After watching him pedal off into the woods, she turns on her heel to start cleaning up the mess her and Hopper have made in their home.

Her mind goes blissfully numb over the next few hours, the mundane task of picking up her things quickly erasing her anxiety about the evening. And for once, she lets herself shut down, the unrelenting exhaustion creeping into her body as she works and she's tempted to give into it, but she needs to stay strong for Mike. She just needs to make it through tonight. Then maybe, just maybe, she can sleep.

The secret knock rings through the cabin at five minutes until six and her heart leaps in her throat. She glances around one last time, before taking a deep breath, exhaling slowly through her nose. He isn't gonna hurt her, or make fun of her. He wouldn't in his right mind have evil intentions toward her and it's with this reassurance that she

unlocks the door, smiling as it swings open to reveal him on the other side.

"Hey," he greets her warmly, transferring the stack of VHS's he's gripping to the other hand holding a blanket so he can embrace her tightly. "Missed you." "I missed you too," she replies quietly, because despite everything going on, she will never, ever get tired of seeing him. "So," he starts once he lets her go. "What do you want to start with tonight?" He begins to move around the space, draping the blanket across the couch and placing his movies by the TV.

Okay. This is it.

"Mike...I actually need to ask you something first." Her heart is racing like mad and she watches him closely as his face fills with mild surprise. "Oh, okay...what...what is it?" he replies and she sighs as she leads them over to the couch, plopping down and he follows her, sitting across from her, close enough that their knees brush when they move. She blows out a breath, trying to reign in her nerves as she searches for the best way to approach this.

"Mike, I need you to tell me the truth." "Always El, you know that," he replies and she eyes him warily. He meets her gaze with honest, caring eyes and it melts her. This is Mike, she reminds herself. Mike doesn't lie and especially not to her. Which is why she's not so sure she's ready to hear the truth to her question.

"How much sleep have you gotten since Sunday?" she blurts out.

Confusion seeps onto Mike's face and she slowly bites her lip, her heart hammering from the anticipation to his response.

"I've gotten plenty of sleep since Sunday. That was really the only night I've had trouble sleeping recently, everything went back to normal after that. Why?"

She doesn't answer right away, too busy eyeing him intently for any signs that he's not telling the truth. Because he has no incentive to lie to her right now and her thoughts have been thrown into a frenzy. She wants to ask again, this time with more force, but instead what comes out is, "...really?"

"Yes, really. I wouldn't lie to you." "But...but you fell asleep in English. Dustin told me so." "Yeah, because the book we're reading is really, really boring. I wasn't tired, I just couldn't pay attention to the book."

Well damn. He's telling the truth. He really has been fine this entire time. All her anxiety, all her worry, all her sleepless nights...it was for nothing. She fell to a lie fueled by nothing but late night thoughts and she was stupid enough to believe it.

"El, how much sleep have *you* gotten since Sunday?" His hands come up to cup her cheeks and his thumbs run softly beneath her eyes. "You've been acting weird since then and the rings under your eyes keep getting darker. What's going on?"

Her mouth opens to respond to him, but no words come out, because this wasn't supposed to be about her, this was supposed to be about him and her being strong enough to carry his load, but that didn't work, and now she feels trapped into a corner, helpless and small.

"Eight hours," she finally manages to whisper and the befuddled look fills Mike's face once again. "A night? That's...that's really good. And you're still tired?" She shakes her head, squeezing her eyes shut and his hands fall from cupping her cheeks to grasping her hands. "No, eight hours since Sunday. Including Sunday night."

"El..." She opens her eyes to see him reaching for her, his eyes immediately filled with concern, but she hesitates. This was not how this was supposed to go. "El," he tries again, his hands dropping back down to hold onto hers. "Why...why haven't you been sleeping?" He says it so gently that she feels tears beginning to clog her throat and she looks away, ashamed of how weak she's been over the past few days, but that only results in him scooting closer. "Please tell me the truth," he whispers.

"I...I've been worried about you. I thought you weren't sleeping and th-that's not good for you because you're growing and you need it. And then I couldn't stop thinking about how I sh-should be helping you, because that's what I'm s-supposed to do and I couldn't and I...I felt horrible."

There's silence after her confession and she squirms slightly, feeling exposed and stupid, but it doesn't last long, because a pair of arms wraps around her shoulders and this time, she goes willingly as he quietly pulls her against him. She rests her head in the crook of his neck and closes her eyes, sighing as she feels her guard slipping down to reveal a girl who's been suffocating silently, in desperate need of help, but too stubborn to reach out for it.

"Why did you tell me?" Mike asks after a while, tracing patterns up and down her back. "I thought you had enough going on anyway, you didn't need my problems too," she admits softly. "I understand," he replies, before he nudges her head with his shoulder and she looks up at him expectantly. "But El, I still wish you would've talked to me. I feel bad now, because you were hurting and I didn't do a thing about it." "Mike, it's okay-" "Is it? Because now I'm sad that you kept this from me." Her heart drops and it must've shown in her eyes, because his face softens and lowers his forehead to rest against hers. "I'm not mad, El," he continues quietly. "I just...I just hate seeing you struggle, especially if I could've helped you."

The corners of her lips turn up at that and she slides her arms around his waist, snuggling farther into him and he holds her tighter, letting his cheek rest against her curls. "I'll tell you next time," she says softly, meaning it wholeheartedly. "And...and promise me you'll do the same? That you'll let me know if you're hurting?" "Promise. You'll be the first one I tell, you almost always are," he replies, his voice warm and she grins, feeling satisfied as the knot in her chest lifts for the first time in four days.

Mike was okay. She was okay.

Well, sort of.

"El?" "Mmhmm?" "Do you want to sleep?" Her heart floods with love and warmth from his words and she leans up to press a kiss to his jaw, before whispering, "Please." He smiles down at her before untangling himself from her and standing up, offering his hand to her and she takes it gladly, rising to her feet and following him to her bedroom. He softly shuts the door behind them, the only light coming from the moonlit window and he tugs her over to her bed. Letting go of her hand, he sits down first, situating himself so he's sitting cross

legged with his back to the headboard and places one of her pillows in his lap. She tilts her head slightly, confused as to what his intentions are until he pulls the covers back in front of him and pats the mattress.

'He's perfect', her thoughts swoon for the millionth time as she takes a few steps towards him, pecking him on the lips gratefully, before crawling under the covers and laying her head gently on the pillow resting in his lap. Her eyes close softly on their own accord and she almost whimpers in delight when she feels his fingers begin to play gently with her hair, skimming across her scalp and combing their way through each curl and she swears she's going to melt right then and there.

But before that can happen, something else incredible happens. Her thoughts quiet, softened by the soothing touch of Mike's fingers and the tightness that clenches at her muscles dissolves, relaxing her to no end and she lets herself fall, blissful slumber awaiting her, wrapping her in its tender embrace.

"I'll be right here when you wake up," is the last thing she hears before El Hopper finally falls asleep.

35. Strong

A/N: Oh boy, has it been too long. I apologize, the month of May was insane, so I couldn't finish the one shot I was originally planning to do. However, I'm going to pour everything into getting that piece out at the end of June in time for Season Three (CAUSE HOLY CRAP WE'RE LESS THAN A MONTH AWAY AHHHHHHHHHH!). In the meantime, here's a scene I've been tossing around in my head for a while, in which El has already returned by the time Will confesses his visions of the Mind Flayer to Mike. Enjoy!

Mike trudges up the worn wooden steps of the cabin, his footsteps as heavy as his heart. His sack of candy drags behind him, the loot he once was so excited to get as a kid now feeling only like a bargaining chip, a way to get to what he really wants.

He's not surprised when the door begins to unlock once he's finally on the patio. He wasn't trying to be quiet...although on second thought, maybe he should've been more discrete on his journey to prevent any watching eyes following him too closely, but that's something he's going to worry about later.

Hopper doesn't look too pleased as he slowly opens the door and leans against the door frame with his arms crossed, guarding what's on the other side of the threshold with authority. On a normal day, Mike would've looked him dead in the eye and made it clear that he wanted to see El whether he was okay with it or not, but tonight his gaze falls to his feet, fidgeting uncomfortably with the end of the bag in his hands.

"Please let me in," he manages to mumble, still looking anywhere but El's guardian's face. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before I came here." "Kid, she told me you were coming," the Chief replies, with just a hint of disappointment and Mike almost misses what he says next, because he's too busy trying to sort out what he feels about El having seen the conversation he had just had with Will.

"So what, you're just gonna run to her every time there's trouble? You ever gonna face your problems on your own?"

That slices through Mike more than he supposes it should and he's speechless as shame is now added to the heavy weight on his chest. He swallows thickly, hanging his head and deciding just to take it, anything that'll get him through that door. Maybe he is weak. Maybe he'll never be independent. Maybe he can't do a single thing right. But if he's all those things, surely the girl in the cabin will still welcome him with open arms.

Finally, after a tense silence, Hopper sighs and steps back, subtly giving him permission to enter, and revealing the love of his life standing in the living room, glaring Hopper down with her mouth dropped open, clearly horrified at the things he said. She sets her jaw, sending him a look that even Mike recognizes as the "we're talking about this later" look before quickly closing the distance between them and grabbing his hands, the touch sending waves warmth up his arms. Without a word, she guides him to her room and doesn't even bother turning around to close the door behind them with her mind.

When she turns to face him with worry displayed on every inch of her face, he feels obligated to say something, but just like with Hopper a few moments before, his words fail him and he falls back into his sheepish position, eyes falling to the ground, arms wrapping around himself in a search for the shred of comfort he craves.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he sees movement, and El is suddenly embracing him, enveloping him in a hold that he loves so dearly...so it horrifies him when his arms refuse to hug her back and his body tries to retreat, "pathetic", "weak" and "inadequate" weaving in and out of his thoughts.

"Mike." Her voice is stern and he snaps to attention, halting his movements and raising his head slightly, his cheek brushing against her temple to let her know he's listening. "I need you. I *need* you. And it's okay to need me too."

Good.

His sack slips out of his hands, and then he's wrapping his arms around her waist, his face dropping into the crook of her neck and burrowing further, further, like the closer he can get to her, the safer

he'll feel, a sentiment that is not incorrect.

She doesn't try to baby him, doesn't tell him it's going to be okay, she simply holds him as tight as he needs her to, and he's starting to wonder what would happen if he just never left her arms.

"I wish you could talk to Will," he mumbles, knowing full well that won't happen for a while...only him and Hopper know about El's return and Hopper's demanding they keep it that way until he can "figure everything out", whatever the heck that means. Keeping the secret hasn't been hard—he's so overjoyed that she's actually here that he understands the importance of her safety and is willing to do anything to keep her protected.

Except, now that the Upside Down might be creeping back into their town, he's not sure El will be okay with just standing by and watch it all go down. That's something the two of them share in common, he's noticed. They both hate being the bystanders and are willing to do anything if it means they can help, so he's guessing that if he goes into battle, she's gonna be right by his side.

"I do too," she replies quietly, bringing him out of his thoughts. "You were right...I understand. I feel it too." He raises his head off her shoulder, his brow creasing as concern begins to bubble in him. "Really?" he asks, wondering why he hadn't heard about this from her yet. His voice softens, studying her closely. "Are we...are we in danger?" She sighs and when she looks back up at him from underneath her long lashes, he can see the heavy look in her eyes.

That's a yes. Oh no.

His heart sinks and she sighs dejectedly, before sinking back into his arms, her head nestling into his neck. He bites his lip and squeezes her tight, trying to ignore how afraid he's becoming. He believed Will, he really did, but to hear it from the person who would know better than anyone else is the final blow.

Something's coming back to Hawkins. And it's not here to make friends.

"Don't overwork yourself this time," he whispers in her ear and she

starts to protest, his name escaping her mouth before he shakes her head. "El, I'm serious. I cannot lose you again. Three hundred and nine days was the hardest thing I've ever done, and I...I just need you to stay. Please."

She's silent and it scares him. "...El? El, please, I-" "You won't lose me. I promise you." "...really?" "Yes. Promise. I can't lose you either. I'm going to stay." He relaxes at that, knowing in the back of his mind that she can't really promise her survival, but the reassurance that she's going to do everything she can to stay by his side is all he needs.

Eventually, she pulls back and he smiles weakly at her. "So," she starts, reaching up to brush his bangs out of his eyes. "Tell me about Halloween." He grins, having almost forgotten about the pile of candy that's laying at his side. "You had candy before?" he asks and when she shakes her head no, he almost goes to find Hopper to ask him why on earth he hadn't given El candy yet, but ops for dumping his stash onto her bedroom floor instead.

It turns out she likes chocolate the best, and his heart pitter patters at the enraptured look on her face when she bites into a Hershey's. Soon, it's just them, their intertwined hands and the pile of candy that they slowly work their way through together, Mike's heart growing warmer with every new discovery El makes.

Tomorrow will be for disapproving fathers and tormented friends and supernatural doom. But for right now, they're together and safe and it's this time with the girl he loves that will give him endurance through the nightmare that's about to come. In the days that follow, he'll look to her for strength, unaware that she's looking right back at him and he'll think several times how he can't even imagine a universe where he'd have to support Will without having her right by his side.

36. First

The first time Mike sees El in a swimsuit, it's the early days of summer and already Hawkins is scorching hot. The Party has been out of school for less than forty-eight hours and they have unanimously declared that they need to do something, celebrate the start of their vacation and cool down from the heat.

The quarry is their first thought, but Mike, El and Dustin all protest adamantly, not quite ready to return to the site where Dustin and Mike almost died. So that's how they found themselves biking to their community pool, the one they hadn't visited since they were kids, having always preferred the peace and solitude of the quarry.

Mike was more disappointed than he'd ever admit when El had gotten her own bike a few months prior. He assured her that he was happy she was going to finally have the freedom of transporting herself around and experience something the Party had cherished since they were little, but there was a small part of him that couldn't help but wilt at the thought of never again feeling her arms around him as they pedaled off to their next great adventure.

She's happy, though. She's so beautifully, wonderfully happy as they ride down the sidewalks of their hometown that he almost rides straight into Lucas because he's too distracted marveling at the joyous smile on her face.

She manages to warn him in time, though, before he comes to a screeching halt behind his friend, protesting indignantly. He's cut off when Lucas turns around to smirk at him, pointing up ahead with a clear question in his eyes. Mike looks around him to see that the sprinklers in their community park have turned on, showering the grass in long arcs of water and he knows immediately what everyone else is thinking.

With knowing looks in their eyes, the Party glances once at each other before they're hopping off their bikes, laying them down gently on the side of the cement and taking off for the sprinklers, tearing off their outer layers as they do so. Mike chases after them with a grin, throwing off his own shirt, but slows to a halt before he can reach the

water, glancing behind him to see that El, while she looks amused by the antics of her friends, is still standing by their now deserted bikes.

He waves her over enthusiastically, but she still hesitates, eyeing the spraying water warily. So, without a second thought, he jogs backward until he's in the path of the sprinkler, stretching his arms wide as it rotates back toward him. He never takes his eyes off her as he's suddenly showered with the freezing cold water, a welcomed contrast to the heat of the day and he can hear her giggle from where he's standing. He calls out to her then, inviting her to join them and she doesn't need much more convincing than that.

She peels off her sundress hastily and his breath leaves him with a *whoosh*. He tries to fight it, but his boyish nature can't help but notice how much skin she's showing, even in a modest, colorfully striped one-piece. His cheeks heat up before he can stop them and he forces himself not to stare, because even though he loves her deeply for who she is as a person, her body is beautiful and he hopes she knows that.

As he watches her walk toward him, it occurs to him that the adolescent side of him should be...ahem...*fantasizing* about her, but he just doesn't want to, because this is El. He's attracted to the way she looks, but even more so to the surprised squeal she lets out when she gets close enough that the sprinkler rains over her. He chuckles, making his way over to her as she gets over her shock and gazes up at him. She's smiling, but he can see the question in her eyes. This is new for both of them and even Mike feels a little exposed standing there shirtless in front of the girl he loves. Gently, he skims his fingertips up her arms, thumbs brushing against her shoulders and finally, his palms cup her face before he leans down to press a tender kiss to her cheek. He watches her eyes light up with the confidence he'd been hoping to give her and he could've sworn she stood up a little straighter.

She smiles up at him then, all dazzling and soft and he could've stood there forever, had she not suddenly grabbed his hand and started running towards their friends, leaving him no choice but to chase after her gladly. They meet the Party where the sprinklers intersect and within seconds, they're drenched as the water sprays fountains over them, but they couldn't care less as the teenagers run aimlessly across the grass, splashing one another and daring each other to get

as wet as they possibly can.

In a moment of overwhelming joy, Mike wraps his arms around El's waist, picking her up and spinning her around, relishing in the pure intimacy of her body pressed against his and then they're kissing, kissing, kissing and he doesn't think he'll ever be happier.

The first time Mike sees El in a costume, it's Halloween of 1985, and although the Party had unanimously agreed not to wear their costumes to school this year (if they thought the reaction from middle schoolers was bad, they *really* didn't want to find out what high schoolers would think of them), they were all adamant about dressing up as a collective for one of their favorite nights of the year.

Brainstorming their next group ensemble was not easy, especially since they were now six instead of four, but when El shyly asked one afternoon if it was possible for her to be Jean Grey, the bad ass superhero the boys were always comparing her to, the rest of the costumes fell into place. Marvel heroes, they decided. It was perfect.

The night of Halloween, it's Max who notices first that El has been in the bathroom long enough for it to be concerning, since Mike is too busy making sure his Captain America costume looked okay. She knocks tentatively on the bathroom door, and when there's no response, she jiggles the doorknob to find it locked. With a sigh, she puts a valiant effort into trying to coax her friend out of the bathroom, attempting to tame her worry as the seconds drag on and when she's asking El for the millionth time what's going on, Mike suddenly appears beside her, shooting her a questioning look, wondering why on earth his girlfriend is locked behind a door. Max just shrugs, calling out to the girl again to let her know who had joined her. For a few agonizing moments, there's silence and now Mike is *really* nervous.

Finally, a faint click is heard and he stands there, a little dumbfounded, before Max lightly shoves his shoulder, her eyebrows raised as she motions to the door and he nods reluctantly. Carefully, he puts his hand on the doorknob, turning it gingerly and praying El won't mind him barging in like this, but his worry for her overrides that.

When he finally gets a glimpse of her, his eyes widen and he feels his stomach swoop, his heart rate picking up, because holy crap, El as Jean Grey is making the nerd in him leap for joy. They'd managed to find a full green bodysuit and Joyce had offered to sew the gold highlights across it to match the gold tights she had on underneath. She looks so unbelievably cool and it takes Mike a few seconds to get over the fact that the superhero he admired on a page was standing in front of him in the form of his girlfriend and...he's never gonna get over this, this is *everything*.

However, all those thoughts fizzle down when he notices the far away look in El's eyes as she stares at the green mask she holds in her hands, fiddling with it occasionally. Shaking himself out of his stupor, he places his hand on her shoulder and she glances up at him slowly.

He sees something he can't quite identify in her eyes. He can pick out the hints of insecurity, but mostly there's just...longing and a little bit of defeat. She doesn't look sad, she just looks like she just lost something she knows she probably won't be able to get back.

It doesn't take much to peel back the layers of her emotions and get to the root of her problem and when he does, he almost smacks himself for how obvious it is.

She doesn't feel worthy of wearing Ms. Grey's costume. Because no matter how much she can pretend for one night, why even try when she's just going to go back to plain old El tomorrow, she explains to him quietly. She mentions something about trying to be someone you're not and Mike just *knows* she's thinking about the makeover Kali gave her last year around this time.

How she doesn't realize that she already *is* a superhero and a way cooler one than the woman she's dressed up as is beyond him. But in a way he understands. He doesn't feel worthy of wearing Captain America's suit either when he knows behind his mask he'll never be as strong or handsome as the real man. Once he's in this, he doesn't want to go back to being Mike. And he can tell El doesn't want to go back to being herself either.

But Captain America and Jean Grey aren't meant to be together. They

rarely cross paths and they run in two completely different circles and it's with this fact that Mike helps settle El's insecurity, grasping her hands and telling her honestly how he'd much rather have her than Jean Grey. But for one night? For one night they can pretend, he tells her. There's no harm in that, and besides, they're getting candy out of the deal, and that's what sells her over.

He pulls her into his arms once she finally seems at peace and smiles at the thank you she whispers into his chest. He replies with admitting that he's pretty sure that Jean Grey would want to dress up as her someday, her giggle making his heart swell, and he doesn't think this night could get any better.

The first time Mike sees El in a hospital gown, he can't stop crying and she can't stop crying and he rushes to hold her, ignoring Joyce's protests. He's flooded with guilt, horror, anger, anxiety, but most of all, a consuming concern for the girl who trembles in his arms. The girl who he should've protected.

When he first got the call from Joyce that El was in the hospital with a fractured wrist and a possible concussion and that she might have to have surgery, but he's not supposed to tell her that, he'd yelled at her, panic seeping into every bone in his body. He'd demanded to know why he didn't know about this sooner, what had happened, if she was going to be okay and, once he was told that she had fallen off her bike in the woods on accident and smacked her upper body against a tree, why on *earth* hadn't he been with her, although that cry was directed more towards the heavens than it had been towards Joyce.

He'd hung up the phone with his throat burning and tears already spilling down his cheeks and turned to see the very worried faces of the two eighth graders he had been in the middle of tutoring. The two kids he had agreed to tutor after school instead of biking El home and making sure she got to her doorstep safe and sound. He might've mumbled something about "seeing them tomorrow," but honestly, he can't really remember, because he'd rushed outside, hopped on his bike and started pedaling as fast as he could towards the hospital.

Which ended up being a lot farther from the school than he realized,

giving him plenty of time to process what was going on.

In reality, he was able to acknowledge that El was in no real immediate danger, so at least there was that. She was conscious...hurting, but conscious and alive. And while he knew her body would heal in no time from this...he wasn't so sure her mind would. El *hated* hospitals. She hated doctors and gloves and needles and being tended to by someone she didn't know. The one time she had ever been to a doctor was when she got really sick right before their sophomore year started and the only reason she went is that every person she loved had been encouraging her to go for a week, pouring their support and reassurance onto her. She went reluctantly with Hopper, Joyce and Mike and Mike has never worked harder to comfort her, never letting her hand out of his grip and watching her constantly, quieting her fears before they could even bubble up again.

And now...now he wasn't there and he wished he could trust that Hopper and Joyce would help her through this, but he couldn't shake the feeling that they wouldn't be enough.

She needed him. And he couldn't stand being away from her side for another second.

He's completely out of breath by the time he bursts through the hospital doors and he's vaguely aware of the startled looks he gets, but he heads straight for the front desk anyway, asking frantically for Jane Hopper, trusting her dad hadn't been stupid enough to put her in as El. The lady tries to tell him that the girl needs to rest and he almost screams at her, but somehow manages to keep his cool, telling her how "Jane" wants to see him and he wants to see her and please, she has to let him go. He's finally given permission and he's jogging to the elevators before she even finishes her sentence.

He hits the button for the third floor, remembering how Joyce had said she was in room 307 and it was the longest elevator ride of his life before the doors finally opened with a ding. He's at her door before he knows it and shuts his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply in an attempt to collect himself, before he raises a shaking hand to the door, knocking out the secret knock without even thinking about it.

There's a few muffled mumbles, before he hears footsteps and the door swings open to reveal a very worn-out looking Hopper on the other side. The man nods once at him, before moving to the side to let him in and he takes two steps before he locks eyes with her and his entire world just crumbles.

Her face is all scraped up and there's a big bandage on the left side of her head that makes his stomach drop when he sees the blood seeping through it. Her left arm is wrapped up securely in a cast, but it looks too big for her petite figure and he feels the urge to rip it off.

But what sends a stab of pain through his gut is the tear tracks staining her face and the way she cries his name, trying to sit all the way up and attempting to get out of the bed to reach him, but Joyce holds her back, gently telling her that she has to remain still. El fights and fights her and it breaks his heart, but she doesn't have to for long, because he's wrapping her up in his arms, squeezing her as tight as he dares and whispering every comforting word he can think of. She clings to him with her one good arm and when she whispers to him in a wobbly voice that she's scared, that does it for him and he begins crying into her shoulder, because he's scared too.

He's scared that he won't be enough and that this will tear down all the progress she's made so far and she'll shrink back into the shell she worked so hard to get out of. But he doesn't have time to dwell on all that, because he needs to focus on the here and now, so he starts murmuring reassurance back to her, telling her over and over again how she's safe here, that no one here wants to hurt her and that he's going to stay at her bedside for as long as he possibly can, protecting her at all costs.

She chooses to tell him in that moment that she wore a hospital gown for six out of her twelve years in the lab and he bites his lip, pulling back to look at her to find her looking down at herself with disgust. The fingers poking out of her cast fidget idly with the fabric she's wearing and he has no doubt that she's spiraling back to her childhood.

He runs with his first instinct and kisses her softly, drawing her attention away from the garment, before pressing his lips down her neck, aware that his tears are beginning to drip onto her skin,

mingling with hers, but he doesn't care as he makes his way to her shoulders, dropping a kiss on each one, feeling the cotton material beneath his lips.

She hiccups slightly at his actions and he glances back up at her to see her watching him intently, her deep brown eyes still sad and worrisome, but they crinkled slightly with the minuscule smile that crept onto her face, meaning she understood. Maybe it didn't help that she was still stuck in a hospital, but she understood that the gown she was wearing was nothing to fear or be ashamed of.

Well. At least he'd helped with that.

After a few moments, his girl sniffs and scoots over in her bed, rustling the blankets as she pats beside her, her gaze almost begging him to join her and he doesn't hesitate, kicking his shoes off and crawling up onto the mattress beside her. All too aware of her injured head, he gingerly wraps his arms around her shoulders, letting her arrange herself against his side, her cheek pressed against his shoulder and her hands clutching at his shirt before he tightens his grip and leaves a kiss against her hair.

The tears and flashbacks and screams were far from over, but for right now, El was tucked up, safe and secure against him and he doesn't think he'll ever be able to let her go.

The first time Mike sees El in heels, they're paired with the dress she's wearing to their junior prom and he's almost positive that he's going to pass out from her beauty as she makes her way down his staircase.

The party had been talking about going to prom for a good while by the time it rolled around, some wanting to go more than others, but in the end, they all agreed to go as a group after Mike had promposed to El in the cutest way possible.

He'd had to ask her to Homecoming the past few years, which he did softly and simply when they were alone, but he knew how much she adored romance and so, threw himself into the task of finding the best possible way to ask El to Prom. He'd settled on a scavenger hunt, taking a Saturday to send her all around Hawkins, having her visit

her favorite places to find a handwritten note he'd entrusted to someone at each location (the manager at her favorite food place in StarCourt, Flo at the police station, even the tree branch in the community park they had both sat on together many times). Every note she found had a declaration of love on it, sharing something new about her that he had fallen in love with before sending her off to her next destination. The hunt ended on the porch of the cabin, where he was waiting patiently for her with a bouquet of roses, a colorful poster asking her to go to the dance with him hanging over the railing. Needless to say, he doesn't remember ever being kissed for as long as she kissed him that afternoon.

Three weeks later, Mike finds himself trying to put on his tie correctly as he stares at himself in the mirror of his basement bathroom while chuckling at the antics that are occurring behind him. The boys of the party were all getting ready in the basement together, teasing one another and enjoying having some time just to the four of them as they attempt to make themselves look at least decent. The girls are burrowed in Nancy's bedroom upstairs, no doubt putting way more effort into how they look than their male friends (well, except for Mike. He wants to look perfect, and so, has spent way too long in front of the mirror, much to the annoyance of his friends) and he absolutely cannot wait to see El. She's going to look stunning no matter what, but more importantly, tonight's about celebrating the fact that she even gets to go to a prom and isn't locked up in an unforgiving tiled room.

His heart leaps into his throat when Nancy finally calls down to the boys that they better be ready, because El and Max are about to come downstairs and he takes a breath, rolling his eyes at the way Dustin claps him and Lucas on the back, promising to catch them when they faint upon laying eyes on their respective partners, to which Lucas mutters how he won't do the same when Dustin sees all the pretty girls on the dance floor. Smirking at Lucas's comment, he grabs the small black box that holds El's corsage before following his friends up the stairs.

He can't tell if the fluttering in his stomach is from nerves or excitement as he stands patiently in his living room, but he decides it's both when Max calls down to ask if they're ready from somewhere

upstairs and he grins despite the thudding of his heart as the boys clamor to stand by the bannister, awaiting their fair maidens.

Max actually looks...really good as she descends the staircase, Mike has to admit. Her navy blue dress strapless dress fits her well and the sash that's draped over her arms adds a nice accent. Blue eye shadow brings out her sky colored eyes and she looks confident, self-assured and he's proud of her. He's pretty sure Lucas hasn't taken a breath since she came into sight and he restrains himself from teasing him, because he has every right to be speechless. And besides, more important things are about to happen.

El's sweet voice rings through the house and his full attention latches onto the sound, only vaguely aware of his own voice calling back up to her to let her know they were ready (which wasn't entirely true. He hadn't been ready for *this*).

He sees the shoes first. Pure white stilettos with jewels glinting in the light as she takes the steps slowly and he smiles, because she's never dared wear anything but flats, but he's heard whispers of El and Max "training" to get her ready to wear heels and *of course* all that work would be for tonight. The elegant hem of her dress comes into view with the next step she takes and oh *wow* the peach lace looks nice against the tan of her legs. The layer underneath is a gorgeous cream color, but he's more focused on the hand that's now resting on the banister as she continues her descent. The promise ring he'd given her when she turned sixteen shines proudly on her ring finger and he's itching to hold that hand, to hold *her*, and he can't even see her face yet.

Until suddenly he can, because she ducks down to look down at them with a bashful look on her face and all the breath rushes out of his lungs.

Oh.

His heart stutters, tripping over itself and it can't decide if it should stop or go into overtime. A wave of heat washes over him, indicating that he's blushing furiously, but he doesn't register that, he doesn't register *anything* that's not the beautiful angel in front of him who he barely recognizes, she's *so* stunning and he has to be either dreaming

or dead.

She's suddenly standing on the landing (when did that happen?) and he can't look away from her, because how could he when she's all he ever wants to look at for the rest of his life?

He's pretty sure he whimpers as she walks down the few final stairs, her beauty invading every corner of his mind, every sense and every thought and then she's standing in front of him, *him*, of all people. He can't find his words as she takes a step closer, finally noticing the heart-shaped hair clip he gave her for Christmas a few years ago pinned up in her flowing locks of curls that spill over her shoulders. She peers up at him through thick, dark eyelashes, cheeks all flushed and rosy, her lips glossy and so, so tempting and he realizes that he's almost eye-to-eye with her, the heels bringing her up more than a few inches.

His forehead falls against hers with ease since he barely has to bend down and then he's whispering every way he can think of to tell this girl how beyond beautiful she is, how lucky he is to have her, how he doesn't deserve her at all and he can't stop repeating that she's so damn. beautiful.

Her fingers dance up his arms, leaving tingles as they ascend, before she finally presses one to his mouth, trapping his words and erasing them with a kiss, and he melts, his love for her singing in his very blood and he doesn't think he'll ever find enough words to tell her how utterly and overwhelmingly beautiful she is, but that's okay, because she knows a fraction of it. That puts a smile on her face and that's all he could ever ask for.

The first time Mike sees El in a graduation cap and gown is, as one would expect, on their high school graduation day one sunny day late in May of 1989. He's just finished slipping his on, when he catches a glimpse of himself in his bathroom mirror and has to do a double take at what he sees.

He's watched class after class graduate from Hawkins High and has seen these dark green gowns all around town for as long as he can remember. He's never really given them a second thought, besides

being glad that another generation gone means another group of older, stuck up bullies is finally going to leave them alone. And yet, here he was in that same cap and gown, tassel dangling to the right and he was *graduating*.

As he walks down the hall to his room in a daze, he remembers how many nights he spent silently groaning about how it would never end—the piles of homework, the disapproving glances of his classmates, the endless lectures from his teachers, it seemed like public education was doomed upon him for an eternity. Don't get him wrong, he thoroughly enjoyed the actual education part of it all, but the responsibility and social sides of it he could've done without.

And now? Now, it was just...over. He had found the light at the end of the tunnel and after today, he would never again have to step foot in Hawkins High.

But also after today, his friends were not obligated to hang out with him any more. It's not like they were all scattering after the summer—they were all staying relatively close to home, with the exception of Max who was just going to be in the next state over, but she had her own car and promised to visit as much as she could. Still, he couldn't shake the fear that they would all ditch him and find better friends was still lurking around every corner he looked.

But graduation is not the end, El had reminded him once. For her, she saw it as her story finally beginning, since she had viewed school as just another thing that was holding her back from the world. In truth, all of them were ready to be set free, escape the town that had caused them so many nightmares, but thankful for the family they had gained because of it. And that family will not be broken. Besides, he concludes as he plops down on his bed. Distance could never stopped him from loving...that was a lesson he'd learned many years ago and never forgot.

A soft knock on his door snaps him out of his thoughts and he reluctantly gives whoever is on the other side permission to enter. He's not surprised at all when El pokes her head into his room, but he is quite taken back by the onslaught of emotion that hits him when she walks towards him, her cap hanging loosely off her head and her gown trailing behind her.

She was his girlfriend, best friend, soulmate, connected to him like no other, but she was still very much her own person who had to complete all of the academic requirements and spent months learning as much as she could about the world around her from a classroom. She had to work just as hard, heck, if not harder than every one of her classmates and he knows just much she poured into succeeding in her classes. And now here she was, the school having deemed El Hopper worthy of a diploma, proving she had indeed completed the rigor of high school and Mike was so beyond proud of her, he could barely stand it. She deserved today more than anyone could understand.

He watches as she takes a seat beside him, glancing up at him with those round chocolate eyes and quips how she could practically hear his contemplation from downstairs. She nudges when he chuckles and he knows she's wondering what's up, so he takes her hand, tracing the well-worn paths that his thumb has traced many times before.

He's afraid, he admits to her. Everything after today is so...ambiguous that it frightens him and she quickly fills in that he's reeling from not having control over what happens next, lightheartedly informing him that his control freak is taking over again. He nods slowly, knowing she's right, but not knowing quite how to silence it. Everything before them was just so big, he expresses to her...they were all moving out in three months, Dustin, Lucas and Max wouldn't be within SuperComm calling distance anymore, he'd have to leave El (and Will too, but he doesn't have separation anxiety with him) for almost eight hours everyday and what if...what if it all falls apart?

There's silence once all of his words are out and it makes him squirm inside, because he knows she's not making fun of his fears (and maybe she has them too?) but she usually has something to say. Eventually, he mumbles that she could forget what he said because it was stupid and to his shock, she replies telling him yes, his worries were stupid. He's about to protest, ready to sputter out his defense when she turns so she can face him, sitting cross legged and taking both of his hands.

What the Party has doesn't just disappear, she reminds him. Their friendship has been so solidified throughout the years that it would

take a million years to ever be able to tear it down. Their friends are not going to just drop them and move on because (and El says this with so much confidence, he has no reason not to believe her) all six of them are meant to be friends for life, so that's what they're gonna be, no matter what happens next.

And, she continues to tell him, she's not going anywhere. Ever. There's a reason why him, her and Will are moving in together at the beginning of the college semester, she begs him to remember and boy, does he ever.

College had not been an easy topic for them to talk about. They dodged it until they absolutely couldn't anymore, when Ted and Karen sat Mike down during the summer before their senior year and told him he had to start planning where he was going to college and what he was going to study. He'd reluctantly brought it up with El one afternoon as they were eating popsicles on his front porch and the one thing she pleaded of him, her eyes welling up and her hands starting to shake, is that he wouldn't go too far. He swore up and down that they would be close, because he couldn't bear to be away from her either, so when him and Will found a university they both liked that was at least an hour and a half drive from Hawkins, it was an unspoken agreement between the three of them that they would live off campus together, they were taking El with them and that was final.

And so, once again, Mike found himself admitting that his girl was right. None of what was going to happen today was goodbye. He'd still have friends and be loved after this. Life was going to move on whether he was ready or not and he was not going to take the next steps alone. He had his best friends in the whole wide world and he had his El.

As he pecks her on the cheek, blushing when she gives him three kisses in return and going without a fight when she pulls him to his feet, he nearly bursts with how much love is overflowing from his heart and he doesn't think he'll ever doubt the strength of the relationships he's been so lucky to form ever again.

A/N: Alright my friends, I'll see you on the other side of Season

Three, provided it doesn't kill me!

37. After

A/N: Hi everyone.

So. Season Three happened. Before I go any further, I'd just like to say how much I enjoyed this season. I absolutely *loved* everything before the epilogue, from the storyline to the character development to the stunning cinematography and of course, all the freaking amazing Mileven scenes that made me soooooo happy.

But then the epilogue happened. And I'm not going to pretend that I took it in stride, because it completely crushed me. I spent the few days after the release of the season sitting closer to depression than I ever had before, because a good majority of my happiness relies on Mike and El being together and happy. And at the end (spoiler alert, but why are you here if you haven't watched it?) they kind of...weren't and that hurt. A lot. So then I wrote this. It's kind of all over the place and I'm still trying to get a grip on writing these two wonderful people in this new stage of their life, but I hope it's what you guys need after the emotional rollercoaster that was this season, because it's definitely what I needed.

If you *ever* want to talk about Mileven or ST, or anything at all really, please feel free to PM me. I'm here to talk and I'm here to listen.

Thanks everyone for sticking around this far and welcome to those who are new! I'm excited to start this new journey in my writing moving forward and I hope you guys enjoy this (very long) one-shot.

They got five days for Thanksgiving. Five blissful days where all they did was talk and kiss and hold one another in between all the feasting and gatherings with the rest of their friends.

The past month has been harder than they'd thought it would be. Mike found that he woke up every morning with a pit in his stomach,

one that twisted and manipulated his heart, until all he could feel was the dull throbbing pressure of pain and all he wanted to do was fall back asleep so he could escape it.

Because she *wasn't there*. No matter how hard he wished and pleaded and begged, she was still thirty miles away from him and it was an unfortunately familiar ache that he could never shake no matter how hard he tried.

She wasn't doing much better. Even though that town held memories she didn't think she was strong enough to face, it also held her home. Sitting in her new room felt...wrong and she always felt a pull to go back up north, to run back into his arms and never, ever leave.

Because that is where she belonged. She belonged with him.

What part of the universe didn't seem to understand that?

They put every effort into lifting each other's spirits though. Before she had left, he had reminded her that they would figure it out *together* just like they always did and they promised one another over and over again to call every night and to visit as much as they could. "I'll see you soon," and the occasional, "I'm yours," was murmured over and over again in the final moments and it had given them the strength to part.

They did indeed call each other every night, without fail. On nice clear nights, it was with Cerebro, where Mike would lay on his back on the grass, staring up at the stars with a goofy grin on his face as her voice floated through the speaker telling him anything she wanted to and he could just picture her lying on her bed clutching the stuffed animals she adores so much. He'd respond with jokes and stories of his own and for an hour every night, everything was okay.

"I miss you. Nine more days, alright?" "I miss you too. I'll see you then, Mike." Then there would always be a pause, words that still were daunting to both of them echoing in every pulse of their hearts and they knew it without having to say it that the other still loved them and always would.

"Eight more days, alright?"

"Seven more days, alright?"

And then before he knew it, it was one more day and then she was standing on his porch with Will and not wasting a second before throwing her arms around him so lovingly he almost started crying. He smiled over her shoulder apologetically to Will, letting him know that he missed one of his best friends too and Will nods, smiling as he pats his friend on the back and makes his way into the house.

Without an audience, Mike squeezes her tighter and buries his face in the crook of her neck. He mumbles, "I don't think I'm gonna let you go," against her skin with a smile and chuckles when she responds with, "Good."

They eventually do let go of one another, only to clasp their hands immediately and even though they just talked last night, they already have so many things to tell each other as they make their way down to the basement. Mike greets Will enthusiastically and the three of them spend the next hour catching up and soaking in the relief that they're together again.

When the rest of the Party arrives, they fall back into the natural order of things as easy as breathing...stories of stupid things they've done are shared, teasing insults are thrown and laughter is constant, a true testament to the strength and health of their friendship.

"This is what it should always be," Mike thinks bitterly, glancing over at the wide smiles on Will and El's faces and he grips El's hand a little tighter, which he's scarcely let go of since he arrived.

He'd learned the importance of giving El the independence she needed back in July, but he hadn't been able to touch her in a month and he was clingy as heck. Much to his relief, so was she. She stayed by his side as she engaged with the Party, joining in on their antics, but always making sure she was connected to him in some way. He was learning when to let her go and likewise for her, giving her space to talk with Max or see something Dustin wanted to show her. But whatever she was doing, he kept his possessiveness firmly at bay, because he knew, in the end, she would return to him.

She would *always* return to him.

Thanksgiving renewed his shriveled spirit, giving him hope in the strength of the Party and El's parting declaration of love sent him soaring through the clouds, a place he has yet to come down from.

(He finally said it to her over the phone a week before he saw her, after an hour and a half long conversation spent reminiscing on their past. He had wanted to kiss her so bad in that moment, but he had settled for something even better and he'll never forget her breathless gasp or her sweet voice returning the words back to him.)

He saw her once more before Christmas, when Jonathan drove down to pick up Nancy...something about a college photography exhibit? He wasn't really paying attention, because he had no idea El was coming and he almost knocked her off her feet with the force of his hug when he suddenly saw her standing at the top of his basement steps.

Nancy convinced her boyfriend to stay a little longer, looking pointedly at him and El with a grin, a move he later thanked her profusely for. He dragged her down to the basement and was about to pull her back into his arms when he noticed the hint of sadness tinting her beautiful brown eyes. He asks her what's wrong, interlacing their fingers and squeezing gently enough to keep her grounded until she looks back up at him and tearfully explains that the Snow Ball was one year ago today.

It hits him like a punch in the gut, the reason why she looks so torn up about this. She's mourning what they had. *Had*. His heart cracks dangerously and then he's cupping her face without thinking about it, wiping the tears away with his thumbs and shaking his head over and over as his words fumble out of him.

"I'm...I'm right here, nothing's changing, El. Please don't...don't worry, we are okay, nothing can change us, okay? Don't be sad, we're figuring it out, I'm...I'm not going to let you go, remember? I'm right here. El. I am right here."

Always.

When she calms down, resting her forehead against his and clutching his hands like her life depends on it, he lets her just breathe, kissing

her lips occasionally, before he leads them over to the couch, where he lays down and invites her to rest on top of him. She accepts gladly, nuzzling her face into his chest and sighing as he begins to rub her back softly.

It took a very long time for them to part that day. Jonathan and Nancy were late to their event, but neither of them could find it in them to care. El apologized profusely that night for bringing down the mood, apologies that Mike blocked every time, telling her over and over how he was glad she brought it up and how they shouldn't be afraid of working through their feelings about this time in their lives *together*.

The Byers all drive down for Christmas a few days later, staying with one of Joyce's old friends. Why they couldn't just stay there all the time was beyond him, but nevertheless, he was so glad they were back and for a whole week too. A whole week of pretending things were back to normal and he would take what he could get.

It didn't take long for the Party to figure out that Will was acting weird. They caught him staring blankly off into space with this hopeless look in his eyes more than once and it stabbed Mike's heart every time he saw it. They figured it was just flashbacks, memories resurfacing because he was once again back in the town that had never been anything but mean to him. But when Mike casually asked how his new school was, he finally spit out the truth.

His high school was terrible. The classes and teachers were fine, but the kids? Bullies. All of them. It'd been two months and none of them had bothered to reach out to him or invited him to hang out or sit with them at lunch. He'd heard whispers floating through the hallways about him. There were no nicknames he hadn't heard before and he was baffled how the entire student body had already figured out that he wasn't entirely straight.

He was *lonely*. Lonely and sad.

No one knows what to say after that. One glance at El proves she knew all this, but it still hurts because she doesn't know how to help. She's not there to beat up the kids who pick on him and while she does her best to comfort him every time, listening to him and giving

him hugs when he needs them, she still can't prevent what happens to him at school.

"What can we do, Will?" Lucas, ever the practical one, asks eventually. "We want to help you." Will shrugs, fidgeting with a Rubik's Cube he picked up from the shelf. "Just...just don't stop being my friends. It helps knowing I have you guys." "Of course, Will. We'll always, always be here for you. Will you call us if you ever need to talk?" Mike asks, watching his best friend carefully and as he replies, "Yeah, yeah of course," with a small smile, he can tell he's not lying.

They sit in a heavy silence for a few moments longer, before Max asks El how homeschooling with Joyce is going, effectively getting the attention off of Will and the conversation is rebooted, picking right up where they left off.

Knowing the distance had been as hard on Will as it had been for him and El, Mike poured everything into making sure he was spending as much time with them as possible, even establishing a day for each of them to hang out with them individually. He and Will took a day to go through Mike's old comics and memorabilia, swapping stories back and forth about both the past and the present as they decided what they should keep, what they didn't need anymore and what they should purchase at the comic book store next time they visit.

He also reserved the day after Christmas specifically for him and El to have together alone so they could trade gifts in private. He was a little confused when he opened his bag to find a bunch of sweaters that actually matched his style perfectly, but when she shyly explained that it was so he could wear them, she could steal them from him and then she'd have even more things to remind her of him, he laughed at her bluntness, kissing her on the cheek in thanks for her thoughtfulness. When she lifts her gift out of her bag, she almost starts crying and he sits up a little bit straighter with pride. He'd found a teddy bear at one of their local stores and immediately thought of her when he felt how soft it was and how comforting it was to hold. He'd asked his grandma to embroider the word, "Promise" on it's fuzzy stomach and when he'd explained it was for a girl, she'd gotten it done within an hour.

El's clutching that bear when she climbs into the car a few days later,

turning around so she can watch him through the back window as the distance between them widens painfully once again. He waves sadly as he watches them go, the new sweater he's wearing keeping him warm as he stares numbly at the place where they just were, already looking forward to calling his girl that night.

In January, El's nightmares come back with a vengeance. And they're bad. Like, *really* bad. Horrible images of all her friends dead, Papa killing Hopper, the Mind Flayer killing her instead of Billy, blood, so much blood and violence and screams filled her nights, making her wake up shaking uncontrollably as she cries out, tears rolling down her face. Will and Joyce do everything they can and they help so much, holding her patiently, talking her through it, calming her down. She loves her new family so much and she's so grateful for their comfort.

It tears Mike apart to hear about them whenever she tells him over the phone the following day, always asking what he can do to help her and the answer is always "just talk to me," because the sound of Mike's voice holds a power that she will never fully understand, but knows she craves desperately. So he tells her over and over again how she's safe, he's safe, everyone they know is safe and everything's okay, hoping his words settle into her subconscious at night and calm the terrors it tries to send her way.

But it doesn't work and one blustery late night, the phone on Mike's nightstand rings, startling him and the rest of the Wheeler household awake. He grabs it blearily, mumbling a "hello?" and when he's met with a frantic, "Mike?" he bolts upright, almost yanking the phone off the surface. "El? El, hey, what's wrong, what's going on? Are you okay?" "N-no! Mike!" She's *sobbing*, and the last time he heard her sound so distraught was the moment she'd found out about her father. It sends his stomach plummeting and his heart twists in on itself, aching for the girl that's so painfully far away from him.

He does his best, speaking every word of comfort he knows, trying everything that's worked before and even trying what hasn't, anything to get her to breathe, to focus on what's real and not what's been fed to her, but nothing is working and he begins to fear that she's going to pass out if she keeps crying this hard.

"Please come, I need to see you," she keeps whimpering, despite the reassurance he tried to pour over her. "Please, *please*, Mike." So, finally he sighs and asks her to put Mrs. Byers on the phone, already having made up his mind that he was gonna see El tonight but wanting to check with her guardian, just in case.

"How bad is it?" "It's...it's bad Mike, I'm so sorry. We normally can calm her down pretty quickly, but she's very shaken up tonight. She woke up fifteen minutes ago and she's still..." She trails off, but El's shaky breaths in the background speak for themselves. "Okay. I'll be there soon. Can you put her back on?" "Mike, no, you really don't have to-" "No. She needs me. I'll be there." "...thank you," Mrs. Byers responds and he sighs internally, grateful that he was doing the right thing. The phone is passed back to his girl and he bites her lip at the way she whispers his name, desperate to know that he's still there.

"El? I'm coming, okay? I'll...I'll see you soon. Promise." "Okay. Hurry." He nods his head, though to what he's really not sure and hangs up, pushing himself to his feet to throw a sweatshirt on, guessing she won't care if he's still in his pajama pants. He throws a change of clothes into a backpack along with his SuperComm, just in case someone tries to reach him, and is racing down his stairs before he knows it.

It occurs to him as he heads to the garage that his entire plan is to ride his bike down a route that takes at least forty-five minutes driving, so biking it will take at least two hours...but he doesn't have any other choice.

His hand is on the doorknob when he hears a deep voice behind him calls his name. Much to his surprise, his father is standing on the stairs, looking at him all confused and bewildered. Ted goes to say something, but Mike beats him to it. "I'm going down to the Byers. I know it's one in the morning, but...my girlfriend needs me." "Son, I know, I heard your conversation." "You...you did?" "Yes, I picked up the phone too. Are you planning on biking all the way down there?"

He resists the urge to roll his eyes, not having the patience for this argument right now. "Yes Dad, and this is urgent, so please just let me-" "Calm down Mike, I can drive you." "...what?" "I'll drive you. What, you think I'm just gonna let you bike to another city in the

middle of the night?" "Um...yes?" "No way, you should be safe. C'mon, we can take my car."

Mike stares at him dumbfounded, before following him out to the car, hardly believing his luck. Who was this man who was suddenly so compassionate for his son? He'd noticed an uplift in his attentiveness over the past few months, intentionally being a part of his family more often than usual, but he didn't think he'd come this far. They make it out of the garage and to the entrance of the neighborhood before he finally blurts out, "Why are you doing this?" He doesn't say it out of annoyance, he's just...baffled.

He watches as his dad sighs, clearly tossing the question around in his head as he turns onto the main road. "Your...girlfriend, El. She sounded...well, like she wasn't going to live if she didn't see you soon. I knew you would go to her no matter what, so I just wanted to make sure you didn't give yourself hypothermia by trying to get to her on your own." Mike hums noncommittally, nodding his head as he thanked the heavens that his dad had listened in, because he was right. He probably would've gotten sick if he'd tried to bike for two hours in the middle of January.

"I can tell you care about her, Michael. And she cares about you. Don't...don't let her go, okay? Don't ever let her go."

A burst of warmth that he can't explain spreads through his chest at his dad's words. He accepts them. He accepts that he's in love with a girl even at such a young age, and his approval shouldn't mean so much to him, but he does, and... "Thanks, Dad. Thank you, that, um...that means a lot. And I don't plan on letting her go. She's...I think she's the one." He gulps, hoping that isn't too dramatic, but he means it. Thinking about being with anyone else but El feels...wrong in an awful sort of way. No, she's it for him. He knows it. His dad nods, a genuine smile on his face, and Mike smiles back, all the tension he's had tied up in his chest slowly fading blissfully.

The car is mostly quiet after that, save for Mike giving him directions from the ones Joyce had mailed him right after they moved, so he would always know how to reach El. The closer they get, the more his thoughts grow anxious, hoping he wasn't too late and she was able to calm down eventually. The after effects of her nightmares

always lasted way longer than he liked, but he had always stayed with her every step of the way and he didn't intend on stopping that now.

When they cross into the city limits, he begins to radio her every so often, wanting to give her hope that they were close and that he'd be with her soon. His leg bounces nervously, clutching the SuperComm so tightly his muscles begin to ache and finally, on the fifth call, she responds, her voice breaking through the static and he slumps back in his seat with relief. "M-Mike? Is that you?" "Hey, hey El, it's me. I'm almost there, okay? Are you doing okay? Over." "B-better. I still want to s-see you. O-over," she replies and he doesn't think he's ever responded so fast. "I'll be there. I'll be there before you know it. Hold on, okay? Over." "Yes. Over and out," and the static returns just as quickly as it left, swallowing her voice up whole.

His dad, thankfully, says nothing and he's sucked up into his thoughts once again, mulling over what he's gonna say to her, what she's gonna need and how he's gonna help her. He knows generally how these episodes go, but it's been two months and he's hoping it hasn't grown so bad he can't do a thing. *But she asked for you*, he keeps reminding himself. *She knows you can help*.

When they finally roll up to the Byers house, he swallows, gathering his strength before going to open the car door, only for his father's hand to fall on his shoulder before he can move further. "Mike?" He turns back to look at him. "Yeah?" "Call if you need anything. I'm proud of you."

He doesn't think he's ever heard his dad tell him that.

"Thank you. Really. I'll...I'll call later." And with that, he climbs out of the car, closing the door quickly before racing up the driveway, heart thudding with each step, because she's *so close*. Please let her be okay, please let her-

The door swings open abruptly as soon as he's on the porch and he can suddenly see her standing in the entryway, all bloodshot eyes and pink stained cheeks. She's a mess, but he couldn't care less, because her face crumples as she tentatively takes one step out towards him, walking cautiously until she's right in front of him, and he can hardly

breathe, suffocating in the pain of seeing her so...broken, but he doesn't dare touch her yet, afraid she'll break completely if he does.

She reaches for him slowly, her lips quivering as she holds back her tears and her hands encircle his arms hesitantly, gasping when she squeezes ever so slightly and it suddenly hits him what she's doing.

She's making sure he's real.

"El..." Her name tumbles out of his mouth desperately, and he goes to say more, but she's suddenly throwing herself into his arms, burying her face in his chest as she begins to sob and he wraps his arms around her on instinct, holding her as tightly as he dares. Once he has a firm grip on her, he slowly lowers to the ground, taking her with him so she's not at risk at falling over from the force of her sobs and she keeps her head pressed to his chest as he pulls her closer to his body, moving one hand up to weave his fingers through her hair and rubbing her back with the other. She's still crying, still shaking with the sobs she has no control over and he rocks her gently, whispering sweet nothings against her hair and making sure she hears and feels nothing but comfort and love from him.

Her cries begin to lessen the more they sit there holding each other close and he leaves kisses on her forehead as she slowly begins to focus on evening out her breaths, until finally she only whimpers occasionally and her hands no longer shake where she's gripping him. A breath he didn't know he'd been holding escapes him as her body relaxes against his, relieved that she's beginning to calm down.

They sit there in a heavy, yet comfortable silence as she sniffs occasionally and he continues to sift through her hair with his fingers, a quiet reminder that she's not alone and he's here for whatever she could possibly need. Which is exactly this, right now—to be held and sheltered in the most loving way possible.

A breeze floats past them, rustling the leaves of the bushes nearby and she shivers, pushing herself further against him in a subconscious attempt for warmth and he notices, pausing his movements and kissing her head once more. "El?" he says quietly, his voice low and scratchy, but he knows she heard him, because she tilts her face up to look at him. His heart jolts at the sleepy look on her face, her brow

creased just slightly as she gazes at him with puffy red eyes and he forces himself to continue. "We can go inside if you want, to get out of the cold," he tells her, suddenly very aware of how freezing the midnight air is and watches as she blinks slowly, looking around them as if she had forgotten where they were before nodding, mumbling an "okay" and rubbing at her eyes.

He slowly extracts his arms from around her and she shivers again, suddenly exposed to the cold and he's quick to get to his feet, reaching down to help her up to hers. He lets her lead him inside the house and he takes a moment to appreciate how cozy it feels. It's not their old house, but it's close and he's glad they'd been able to create something that felt like a home.

Joyce and Will stand huddled in the kitchen, glancing at them expectantly, looking worried enough that El waves timidly at them and quietly murmurs that she's better now, glancing up at him as she trails off. *Better now, because of you* she's implying, and it warms his heart. They both nod, their faces relaxing noticeably and Joyce sighs, walking over slowly and when she's close enough, she pulls the both of them into an embrace that they gladly return. "Thank you Mike," she whispers before she plants a kiss on El's head.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you'd like," she tells him as they pull back and he nods, smiling weakly at her. "Is it...is it okay if I take him to my room?" El pipes up beside him and he tenses, remembering how stern Hopper was with him being in her room, but to his relief, Joyce responds with, "Of course, sweetie. Just...behave alright?" She winks and they know she means it in good nature, bidding both her and Will goodnight, before she grasps his hand and tugs him down the hall with her.

Her room isn't anything fancy...just a bed, a dresser with some knickknacks on it, a nightstand that holds a framed picture of his smiling face that makes his heart skip a beat, another one of the whole Party and a lamp in the corner that she turns on, bathing the room in a soft orange glow.

He lets her take the lead from then on out, sitting on her bed when she asks him to, resting against the headboard as he laces their fingers together once again and just lets her talk. Her head slides

down to rest on his shoulder and he holds her hand firmly as she quietly recounts the dream to him.

She had been back in StarCourt, Billy hovering menacingly over her as the Mind Flayer screeches in the background, its sounds magnified a hundred times by her subconscious. She can't hear Billy, but she knows what he's telling her...to stay still, that it'll be over soon, but she looks him dead in the eye and tells him exactly what she'd told him the first time. There was a time when he was happy. There was a time when he wasn't the monster. He didn't have to do this. Only, it wasn't working, he couldn't hear her over the screams of the horrible monster looming over them and she panicked, kicking and writhing and screaming, but it was no use, Billy's grip on her was too strong. With her powers out, she was helpless to the tendril that was extending from the Flayer, snaking its way towards her, ready to infect, devour, kill and she screams and screams and screams.

"But it didn't get me." "Really?" "No. B-Because you and H-Hopper ran out from the Gap and stood right in front of me. I couldn't do anything and I had to watch a-as that th-thing..." she begins sobbing again and he reaches his arm up to wrap it around her gently, allowing her to curl up against his chest. "That thing ripped out y-your heart..." Her hand comes to rest above his very alive, very beating heart and he kisses her forehead softly. "And I...I had to watch as you fell to the g-ground and M-Mike...it was *awful*. It didn't even t-touch Hopper, it just went straight for y-you and it all just felt so r-real..."

"And then...you woke up believing Hopper was, um, alive..." He concludes and she nods sorrowfully. "And when I remembered that h-he's *not*..." She whimpers, holding back a sob and he squeezes her tighter, a lump crawling up his throat, because he knows where she's going with this. "You thought I wasn't either?" he whispers quietly as she purses her lips, nodding slowly, her eyes cast downward. "Which...is *stupid*, because it's obviously not true, because you're here and...I'm so sorry I made you come down here."

He's shaking his head before she's even finished her sentence. "If you ever need me for anything, I'll be here, you only have to ask, El. Nothing you need could be stupid. *You* are not stupid, okay?" She's looking up with him with glassy eyes as his thumb draws circles on

her shoulder. "And besides, I always need an excuse to come down and see you," he says lightly and her lips curl up into a watery smile. "I just feel bad—" "Don't. Don't ever feel bad. I want to be here with you. A-Always."

A flash of doubt crosses his mind, wincing at how dramatic that sounds, but it causes her to *melt*, smiling warmly and wrapping her arm around his waist, burrowing further into his side and *this*, this feels like home. "I wish you could be here always too."

He ends up spending the rest of the night with her, knowing Mrs. Byers wouldn't mind. His arm is draped cautiously over her waist as they begin to doze off, her fingers clinging lazily to his shirt and he watches her closely, waiting until she's finally asleep to let himself drift off as well.

When morning finally comes, Mrs. Byers tells them something over breakfast that lights up the world for both of them. "El,

I was thinking a lot last night. I have a question for you and I want you to give me an honest answer, alright?" When El nods, she takes a breath before looking her right in the eyes. "If Mike came up and spent the night here sometimes, do you think your nightmares would go away?"

Mike feels his jaw drop, knowing immediately what El's answer would be and his heart is already leaping for joy. Glancing at him with excitement, El squeezes his hand before replying confidently, "Yes. I think they would." And that's how Mike got permission to visit every two weeks to have a sleepover with two of his favorite people in the entire world.

Things got better after that. For her, the nightmares did indeed cease, the feeling of him and Will resting beside her giving her the peace of mind that she was indeed safe and protected shoving away the horrible memories and for him, having a definite time when he knew he was for sure going to see his girlfriend gave him back the hope and the contentment their move had robbed him of. For the first time in a while, both of them were happy. Maybe not completely, but happier than their friends had seen them in a very long time.

February brought Valentine's Day and while Mike had enjoyed every moment of the holiday last year, stumbling through an explanation of how special the day was and why he wanted to celebrate it with her, before showering her in gifts and being showered with kisses in return, he wanted this one to be even more memorable than the last. Hence, why he convinced his mom to drive him down early that day so he could surprise El and spend the entire holiday with her celebrating their relationship. Only, as they were driving along the now-familiar county road, a car whizzed past them and when Mike got a glimpse of Joyce and El in the front seats, he yelled for his mom to stop and turn around, ignoring her reprimanding for scaring her half to death.

Thank goodness the Byers had noticed them too, because they also swung back around and once the cars had been pulled over to the side of the road, the two teenagers leaped out of their seats, laughing in disbelief as they ran to one another. They met in a fierce embrace, talking excitedly, trying to make sense of what was happening over the sheer thrill of seeing one another that he hopes secretly will never go away.

El had been on her way to surprise him too, and as they're laughing about their timing, Mike pulls her back into his arms, whispering an "I love you," wanting only her to hear it.

March brought Will's birthday and the Party surprised him with a D&D Day. As much as he tried to protest that he was over that phase, his friends knew him better than that. He had missed this. And if they were being honest, so had they.

They all found themselves piled in Mike's basement, nostalgia hitting them in waves as they ventured into the campaign Mike had spent all his free time whipping up, getting help from anyone he could. It was only Max and El's second time playing, but that was okay, because they hadn't played in so long that they were all kind of bad at it. Mike lost count of how many times each character came within an inch of their lives and while their twelve-year old selves would've been pacing the length of the basement, acting like the world was ending, after they *actually* had seen the world about to end, a little statue of a monster didn't seem so threatening anymore.

But they had *fun*. They were having so much fun exploring the world Mike had built, the dynamic different than before, but that was okay, because they couldn't stop laughing or teasing each other.

Until Mike grabbed the wrong game piece, accidentally putting out the Demogorgon and the silence that paralyzed the group was jarring. He hastily pulls it back, apologizing profusely for grabbing the wrong figurine, painfully aware that he killed the mood. El silences his rambling by slipping a hand into the crook of his elbow, glancing at him with a look that both shuts him up and quiets his guilt for ruining everything.

No one speaks for a while, the campaign having halted in its tracks, because no one really knows what to say. That monster was the beginning of all the trauma they've worked so hard to heal over the past few years and they're not scared of it, no, they're past that. But the reminder of it is crippling and it's as if they're afraid they'll open the floodgates if they dare say a word.

It's Max who breaks the spell. She stands suddenly and Mike can feel El jolt next to him at the noise, but before he can reprimand her, she marches over to him and plucks the offending figurine off the table. There's various confused questions from the Party, calling after her as she walks over to the basement door determinedly. In one swift motion, she opens the door, steps outside, throws the Demogorgon as far as she can and reenters the basement, closing the door like nothing had happened.

And that was that.

In April, Mike came down with the flu. So, Joyce drove El up to Mike for their regular visit much to his protest, not wanting to get her sick as well, but his girlfriend is as stubborn as she is loving and he finally ended their phone call one night by sheepishly admitting that he still wants to see her, even if that means she has to stay across the room from him. Because the truth is, he was *miserable*, but anything related to El would make him feel better under any circumstance.

He's asleep when she sneaks up to his room that Saturday morning, smiling softly at the sight of him curled up in his blankets, his feet peeking out at the end of the mattress. He doesn't look great

objectively...his skin is clammy and unnaturally pasty, his nose a rosy red and he's breathing through his mouth, drooling a little as his breaths flow unevenly. His hair is a mess and he looks so worn out, it makes her heart hurt. But despite all that, she's here and he's here and that's all that matters.

She sits with her back against the wall facing his bed for a while, reading one of the books she pulled off his shelf, sounding out the harder words to herself. She's hooked by the plot, sure, but she catches herself just staring at Mike more often than she's paying attention to the words in front of her, a dilemma she has no complaints about.

Which is why she notices it easily when he begins to stir, groaning as he surfaces back to consciousness. She watches, amused, while he tries to make sense of his surroundings, wiping the grogginess from his eyes and trying to sit up, only for the burden of his sickness to force him to lay back down. It takes him a while to notice that she's there, but when his glazed eyes finally flit over to her, she smiles, letting him take his time to figure out that she's actually there. He murmurs her name with a dopey smile on his face...before promptly dozing off once again and she can't hold back a giggle at the way he slips so easily from looking at her lovingly to being asleep in mere seconds.

She loses track of how long she sits there, content with a book and a sleeping Mike as the sun goes from glaring through his window to lighting the room gently while climbing high into the sky. Mrs. Wheeler pokes her head into the room just when El's stomach is starting to grumble, smiling fondly at her son, before entering the room with a tray that holds two steaming bowls of what she assumes is soup. She places one in front of El on the floor, handing her a spoon with a gentle "Here you go, sweetie," before going to place the other one on Mike's nightstand. She nods her thanks and begins to devour it quickly, sighing at the flavors that explode in her mouth.

The smell must've woken him up, because his eyes blink open shortly after and, just like before, he glances around in a disoriented haze, before he notices she's there. "You're still here," he mumbles as his lips stretch up into a smile and she nods. "I'm still here. I don't want to leave you," she tells him tenderly. "Mmm, I don't *want* you to

leave." As he finishes his sentence, his eyes drift up to his nightstand and she has to bite back a laugh at just how excited he looks to see food sitting there and she has to shove down the urge to rush to his side and cover his face in kisses at just how adorable he's being. She really, *really* shouldn't go near him...she hates being sick and her immune system isn't fantastic, so she's stuck with just being in the same room as him, and nothing more.

Only, as he tries to push himself up to a sitting position, he falters, grunting as his arms shake and El is by his side in an instant, looping his arm around her shoulders to help support him and together they get him upright and leaning against the pillows.

Oops. Well, since she's already over here...

"Hi," she whispers, before kissing his forehead, watching as a blush adds itself to the rosiness of his cheeks. "Hi," he whispers back, smiling up at her, looking hopelessly in love and she adores it. She hands him the bowl of soup, kneeling by his bed as he slurps it slowly, watching her intently. She does most of the talking, since his throat is sore and his energy has been drained by his illness, telling him what she thought of the book she was reading, the silly conversation she'd had with Holly when she arrived, the cute deer she'd seen on the drive up, no matter how mundane the content, he listened.

She took his bowl once he was done, crossing the room to stack it on top of hers. His eyes must've followed her, because he noticed the book where she'd placed it face down to mark her spot. "Hey El?" "Yes?" "You could, um...you could read to me if you want."

She knows him. She knows that means "Please read to me, I like hearing your voice." So she grabs the book, hurrying back to his bedside and propping herself against the wall by his head as she flashes him a smile, earning one in return. Mike reaches a hand out to her, and she grasps it, resting their hands up on the mattress as she begins where she'd left off, weaving the story for the boy beside her as he traces patterns on her hand.

How she doesn't get sick after that is a mystery beyond her.

In May, El's powers returned. She hadn't tried using them in a while, accepting that they were no longer a part of who she was, but when she accidentally knocks a framed photo off her dresser, her mind reaching out instinctively, willing it not to hit the ground...it freezes mid-fall. In shock, she plucks it out of the air, putting it back on the dresser hastily to wipe at her nose.

They were back. They weren't nearly as strong as before, but they were back.

Being powerless not only meant no telekinesis, but no void as well. Finding people just by thinking about it was a luxury she hadn't realized she needed so much until she had to wait to see them in person like people normally have to. She'd missed watching her friends in the void, if only for a few seconds just to make sure they were okay. But more importantly, she missed being able to reach out to a certain ebony-haired boy whenever she was feeling lonely and just sitting in his presence, watching as he became adorably confused as to why he felt her all of a sudden.

With a grin, she rushes over to her closet, pulling out the blindfold she had kept just in case and switches on her radio, before tying it around her eyes and waiting patiently to slip into the space she'd missed so dearly.

When she opens her eyes, Mike is there. Her heart leaps and she rushes over to him, her feet splashing in the wet nothingness of the Void until she's standing in front of the Wheeler kitchen table, watching him take a bite of a cookie as he writes something down on a piece of paper.

He's just so *pretty* in the Void and she sighs, thrilled that she can finally access this place again. The dark backdrop brings out his eyes more and the pale contrast of his skin is beautiful and she wants to touch him so badly. She reaches out a hand on instinct, but before she makes contact with anything, his movements stop suddenly, and his brow furrows in the familiar way she loves. He looks up and makes direct eye contact with her and she gasps sharply, her heart thudding at his gaze. She watches as his eyes light up and she knows he can't actually see her, but she's always loved the moment when he realizes she can see him. With a goofy smile, he waves ('dork', she

thinks affectionately), before glancing around, probably making sure there's no one around, before he whispers, "Hi El. I'm gonna go get my SuperComm, alright? Don't go anywhere, I'm coming back." With that, he rushes off to somewhere she can't see and she shuts her eyes, not wanting to see him disappear. She *hates* seeing him disappear. Teetering on the edge of the real world and the void, she fights to stay here, gritting her teeth until she hears footsteps and opens her eyes in relief to see he's returned clutching his device.

He switches it on eagerly, before walking towards her with cautious steps, not wanting to accidentally touch her and send her hurtling out of the void. When he's close enough, he sets the SuperComm on the table and turns to face her.

"El, can you hear me?" "Yes. Hi Mike," she replies and he looks ecstatic, grinning widely as he chuckles. "Hi El. I've, um...I've missed this. A lot." She's smiling so wide, her cheeks hurt but she really doesn't care. "I've missed this too. They're back. My powers, I mean. I can use them again." "El, that's so awesome! When did they come back?" She giggles. "Five minutes ago. I wanted to come tell you." "I'm so glad you did. Do they hurt? You know, from being out of use for so long?"

His concern warms her from the inside out and she just wants to kiss him and hold him, but that's impossible, she reminds herself bitterly. "I'm not as strong," she admits and his eyebrows raise so high she's surprised they're not touching his hairline. "Well don't tire yourself out, alright? I love it when you visit, but if you need to rest, I'll talk to you tonight, okay?" She sighs in relief, because she can feel her head throbbing distantly. "Thank you Mike. I'll see you soon." "Anytime El, I'll talk to you later..." He clears his throat, glancing down at the ground and she inches forward, smiling softly at the blush on his face. "I miss you. I'm excited to see you next week," he whispers. "I miss you too," she says, pouring all of her heart into the words that they unfortunately say so often.

Screw it, she thinks and darts forward to kiss his cheek softly. There's skin-on-skin contact for the briefest second and she hears his gasp before she's launched out of the darkness and back into her body, which is very, very tired. She grabs a box of tissues, cleaning herself up before falling asleep blissfully.

Mike revokes the "no spying" rule that night. "Just...just please don't keep looking if I'm doing something embarrassing." "Too late." "El!"

When summer rolls around, El is delighted to hear that Mike isn't needed much around his house, since his parents are mainly focused on Nancy leaving for college in the next few months. Plus, without school or homework or responsibilities, that leaves them whole weeks that they get to spend with each other. And finally, *finally*, things begin to feel normal again. The constant pang of being separated isn't as sharp anymore, because they know that the longest they'll go without seeing each other is a few days.

Admittedly, everyone is on edge as they get closer to the anniversary of the Mind Flayer trying to take over the world, so the Party sticks close together, going about their regular teenage summer antics, but looking over their shoulders every once in a while, because if the evils that plagued them last year return, at least they'll be ready.

Fourth of July comes and goes without a hitch, much to the Party's relief. They finally get to stuff themselves with hamburgers and laze about in the pool and enjoy the celebrations just the six of them, like the holiday should've gone the year before. But the highlight by far was getting to show El fireworks in a setting that wasn't destroying a giant inter-dimensional monster. She flinched at the first couple that went off, but Mike looped an arm around her waist as Max grabbed her hand and she relaxed at the touch, her head lolling back onto Mike's shoulder as she slowly let the painful connotations of the display above her dissolve into ones of celebration, independence and, most importantly, *love*.

When Joyce told Will and El, it took everything within them not to phone all their friends and scream the wonderful news at them. No, they agreed together, this had to be special, something they dropped on them like a bombshell when they weren't expecting it. They spent so many nights whispering conspiratorially, planning out just what they were gonna say and when they were gonna say it and predicting who was gonna cry (Mike, El insisted. Mike was gonna cry). Every night when she called him, the secret bubbled happily inside her, lifting her spirits and her soulmate couldn't help but hear the giddiness that she tried to mask. "What're you so happy about today?"

"I can't tell you," she teases him. "Why not?" "Trust me. You'll know soon." "Okay..." He sighs and there's a heavy beat of silence, before he continues, his voice all warm and soothing. "I'm, uh...really glad you're happy, El. That makes *me* happy."

Little does he know how overjoyed he's going to be tomorrow. Because tomorrow, Mrs. Byers is driving them up to Hawkins and dropping them off at Mike's house, before meeting with the local realtor to inquire about houses on the market in the small, cozy town.

They were moving back after Jonathan went to college. The distance had stretched them too thin and her mom had noticed, sitting them down night after night to discuss the pros and cons of staying right where they were. They understood that money was an issue, and it had taken a financial hit to uproot the first time and move everything down south, but both El and Will were clear on the feelings they'd suppressed for the sake of their mom who was convinced she was doing the right thing. Their home was in Hawkins, even with all the pain that came with it. The people there were *everything*, and while they were appreciative of each other and the bonds of family between them...they felt horribly incomplete without their friends.

"Okay," Joyce had said with a sigh. "We'll go back. For good this time. You two deserve it." She was met with two pairs of arms wrapping around her, thanking her profusely over and over again, tears welling up at the thought of finally being near their true family once again.

El finds herself almost shaking with anticipation as she sits on Mike's bed, grasping the hand of her boyfriend, "tomorrow" having finally turned into "today". The rest of their friends are lounging on the floor, discussing back and forth over what they should do that day. She hopes she's not being too obvious, because she keeps glancing over at Will, barely suppressing a grin at the knowledge they both hold. Getting everyone's attention is going to be a lot harder than she originally thought, as she swears there's seven different conversations happening right now, but that's how it should be with them and she soaks in the feeling of being with her friends for just a few moments longer.

'It's going to be like this all the time again. Soon,' and as that thought

fizzles deliciously in her chest, she blurts out, "Will and I have something to tell you guys." She's met with curious silence as all attention suddenly snaps to her and her brother and she bites her lip to contain her grin, subconsciously holding Mike's hand tighter. One glance at Will shows him smiling uncontrollably and he nods at her, graciously letting her do the honors, because he knows how desperately she wants to tell them.

She breathes in. She breathes out.

"We're moving back!"

...

"What?!" "Are you serious?" "You're gonna come back?! You're gonna go to school with us?!" "ARE YOU SERIOUS?!"

She bursts out laughing as everyone starts talking at once, the excitement and relief of finally telling them lighting up every corner of her being and the sheer joy of the moment bursts within her vibrantly. "Yes, seriously, we're coming back!" They enthusiastically begin to talk over each other again, clamoring for details as she feels herself being pulled into Mike's arms. He smushes her against his chest, but she doesn't care, because she knows it's purely out of joy and she'll happily stay squished as she listens his voice bouncing spastically, asking as many frantic questions as the rest of them. Resting a hand on his forearm, she lets him hold her as Will gets them all to quiet down with a goodnatured, "Hang on, we have answers if you nerds would shut up!"

They do and glance between the two of them expectedly, anticipation making them all jittery and El finds it adorable. "We never wanted to move away, you guys know that," Will started, his voice serious and calming the atmosphere. "But we knew it was what was best at the time." "Or so we told ourselves," El adds and Mike squeezes her empathetically. "Right," Will continues. "As we told you guys over Christmas...um...the school I was at sucked." "It didn't get better, did it?" Lucas cuts in, looking at his friend with concern and Will shakes his head, gazing down at the ground. "No, the, um...the bullies got worse. I couldn't...I couldn't find *anyone* who wanted to be friends."

El could hear the heartbreak settle among her friends and is about to pipe up, when Dustin nudges Will with his foot. "Why didn't you tell us? That it was still happening, I mean." "I didn't want you to worry, especially since there wasn't much you guys could do. But I can tell you that thinking of you guys and how...how much you all actually care about me is what got me through each day. That and El," he says simply, smiling up at her appreciatively and she nods at him, recalling all the nights spent soothing him through his insecurities and sharing hers in return. Mike's thumb discreetly traces circles on her back and she nuzzles further into his chest.

"Anyway," Will says, clearing his throat. "El wasn't much better off." "Hmm, I wonder why," Max says, but to everyone's surprise, there's only a hint of teasing in her voice. The rest of it almost is...sad, like she was hurting for her best friend and El shoots her an appreciative glance. To her surprise, she feels Mike's lips press against her forehead, right there in front of everyone and her cheeks grow warm as she smiles softly. "And I wanted to go to school with my friends," she adds casually and feels Mike jolt is surprise. "You're actually going to school? With us?" The hope in his voice makes her heart sing and she nods eagerly, grinning up at him to see his face purely alight with exuberance. "That's incredible, you guys! You're coming to Hawkins High!" Dustin whoops and when Will adds, "Mom is looking for houses right now as we speak," that's the final blow and the reality that El and Will Byers are coming back to them is cemented into place.

Suddenly, it's like when they left, but the complete opposite—warm hugs overjoyed instead of sorrowful, words exchanged laced with laughter instead of tears, eyes dancing with happiness instead of barely concealed fear. The world was righting itself again and they each knew somewhere in their hearts that it was going to stay that way for a very, very long time.

Somewhere in the celebration, someone (probably Dustin), shouts, "We gotta go tell Steve!" and they're suddenly rushing for the door, laughing and talking energetically as they relish in the adrenaline of this revelation.

El feels a familiar hand tug her back and she watches her friends go, catching Max's eye and motioning to the boy behind her and she

nods, winking as she guides the rest of the Party downstairs to let the two of them have a moment. El closes the door softly with her mind and turns back to face him.

His eyes are watery (she totally called it), but that's okay because hers are too, and he wordlessly pulls her closer, grasping both of her hands in his. As she watches patiently, he opens his mouth, shaking his head and chuckling breathlessly as words fail him. He tries again a couple of times, stuttering out a few words, before blowing out a breath with a smile and his eyes flit up to meet hers.

She sucks in a breath at the deep, consuming look in his eyes and she willingly falls farther and farther into it as she feels her tears start to spill over her lashes because she's gazing at her future. She's gazing at the boy she's gotten to grow with over the past several months through aching separation and patches of the days she did get to spend with him that were weaved with love and happiness. She's gazing at the impossible dream she'd almost let go of that's now just over the horizon.

Because they're going to go to high school together. They're going to work through piles of homework together and face down bullies and be *that* couple in the hallways and take each other to dances and rebelliously stay out way past their curfew if only to have a few more minutes with one another. They're going to watch the other mature and flourish into their own wonderful person, exploring the world with the assurance that the other is supporting them every step of the way. Everything that had crumbled, slipped out of their fingers in an instant was rebuilding itself in a vision that seemed almost too good to be true.

But it was real this time. This was real.

She rests a hand on his cheek, gently wiping away the few tears rolling down his skin and when they realize no words are powerful enough to match this moment, he lowers his lips to hers and she meets him halfway, wrapping her arms around his neck as he kisses her tenderly over and over again. His hands clutch at her waist as she meets him kiss for kiss, reassuring him silently that she's not leaving him again and they now have all the time in the world to just do *this*.

They part eventually when they both are giggling too much to continue and she hopes this wonderfully childish feeling of joy never goes away. "I-I love you, El," Mike murmurs to her, grinning like the fool in love that he was and she laughs just because she can. "I love you too." She presses one more kiss to his mouth before whispering, "Forever."

She tugs them gently out of the room then, away from the doubt and the pain and the longing of the past year and towards the rest of their lives.

38. This Is An Update

Hi everyone!

If you were expecting a one-shot, this is not that and I'm very sorry. My free time to write has been extremely minimal over the past month purely because I'm getting ready to go to start as a freshman at an out-of-state university. It's a huge change in my life and it's only to get more hectic from here. Don't panic, this is not even close to a goodbye, this is just me letting you all know that it could take a little while until life calms down and I can actually update again. I have a few solid story ideas that I'm very excited to work on and I'm very annoyed that I haven't had any time to develop them, but no worries, I'll get out as soon as I can. In the meantime, if you need a Mileven fix, I have a huge list of great fics that I've favorited on my profile if you want to check those out. I've also just recently joined AO3 and my list of bookmarks is slowly growing over there as well if you're interested.

Thank you guys for understanding. There's no way in heck I'm going to abandon this project because this fandom and this ship mean so much to me, but don't freak out if I go quiet for a little bit. I'll be back as soon as I can and I hope you all are still here when I return.

Love you all and I'll talk to you soon!

disneyprincess315

39. Lost

A/N: Hello, I have returned!

WarMasterTrey asked a long time ago for the Party to go to both a theme park and a beach and I took that and mixed it with a few of my own ideas and now here we are! RockloreOtter also asked when this fic was almost complete for the Party to go to the beach, so I hope this satisfies that as well! Sorry, this took so long, you two, and I hope you're okay with what I threw in there as well.

Also, I've never had a panic attack myself, but I wanted to tackle writing one, so to any of you who do experience them, I hope this doesn't offend you and I hope it's somewhat accurate.

As always, thank you all for all your support, I love you all and I hope you enjoy this!

"Do you ever wish you just...weren't here? Like...like you could just snap your fingers and instantly be in a new place?"

El glances up when Max speaks, studying her friend closely from where she sits cross-legged across from her. She smiles sadly and nods because it's almost comical how many times she's wished the same thing.

Today is one of Max's bad days. They've all been having them since...everything happened. Not a day seemed to go by without a flashback or a nightmare or paralyzing sadness or something striking out of nowhere and dragging them back to the places they worked so hard to get out of. It was a familiar routine they'd been through after the events of '83 and '84, but oh, what they wouldn't give to escape it. Needless to say, they were all scarred and painfully so.

El hadn't been in the best of places when Max had shown up at her doorstep, mumbling something about how hard it had been to get up that morning, the memory of Billy's final moments echoing relentlessly in her mind. Conveniently, El hadn't wanted to be alone

either and so, they found themselves plopped on her bed, the silence growing heavy with the burden of their troubles.

Max's question becomes the first time either of them have spoken in half an hour. El sighs, fidgeting with the bracelet on her wrist before she softly replies, "All the time."

She wouldn't want to leave forever...heck no, there are too many people she loves here. But just to escape for even a few hours from the reminders of what she lost that are scattered all throughout town sounds like a heaven she would give anything for.

"Where would we go?" El asks curiously, arranging herself so she's laying on her side, her elbow propping her up. She's asking purely to get Max to think about something else, but a vision of a better place wouldn't hurt too bad.

"Florida," Max replies without hesitation. El's brow furrows and she tilts her head, urging her friend to continue. "It's another state. You know, like Illinois. And Indiana, where we are right now. Except this one is on the edge of the country. It's surrounded by the ocean, just like California. I want to see it again. I want to see the ocean and squish the sand between my toes and break the waves with my body and stay out in the sun for hours..." she drifts off, her eyes whimsical, staring at memories El can't see. "Why not go back to California?" she asks simply, although she has a feeling she knows what she's going to tell her.

"It's too much," Max replies softly after a few heavy moments of silence. "There's too much...pain there. Too many things to remember. But the beach was always one of the things that would help me forget. I...I want that again. Just not there." The longing in her voice sends a pang through El's heart and she tucks the name "Florida" back into the corners of her mind. "Tell me more about the beach," El whispers as Max rests her head against her shoulder.

She brought it up to Joyce that evening at dinner. "How expensive is it to go to Flor-id-a?" she pipes up, sounding the word out carefully, wanting to get it right. Her adoptive mother glances up at her, pausing mid-bite in a way that was strangely reminiscent of Hopper. "Well, I guess it depends. There's the price of an airplane ticket and a

hotel room, plus all your meals and any activity you do...are you asking this because you want to go?" El just shrugs, pushing the food around on her plate. "Max was talking about it today," she says quietly. "I just...I just thought it'd be nice to get away from here. Just for a little while." She watches hesitantly as Joyce nods slowly, biting at her lip with her brows furrowed in a contemplative way. "Well, it wouldn't be impossible. I may have a few connections down there," she finally says, a playful grin sneaking onto her face. "If you want, I can take you to the travel agency tomorrow and we can check it out." "Yes please," she responds, perking up at the possibility that this actually might work.

Much to her surprise, it did indeed work.

As it turned out, Joyce has an old family friend named Maria who lives right next to Miami Beach with her husband and, during a late-night phone call she made when El was asleep, she asked if they wouldn't mind having six enthusiastic teenagers stay there for a week and her friend agreed right away, rambling on and on about how lonely they'd been since their youngest daughter moved away to college.

El was ecstatic when Joyce told her that there was a chance they actually might be able to all go together. A part of her knew she should wait until it was final before she got her friends' hopes up, but she spilled it to Mike the next afternoon the second she saw him, throwing any thoughts of keeping it a surprise out the window. Mike excitedly told Dustin, who told Lucas and pretty soon, going on a vacation together was the only thing the six friends could talk about. Somehow, the parents got wind of it and Karen jumped on it immediately, insisting she pay for both Mike and El's tickets and even a part of Will's if Joyce needed the help. She claimed it was because the Wheelers had leftover vacation money they hadn't been able to use this year or last year and while El believed her, she had a feeling she just wanted to pull her son out of the harsh reality she saw him living through this past month.

And then suddenly, they were going to Florida. She doesn't really know how it happened, because the planning for it past in a blur (like everything seemed to nowadays), but before she knew it, she was in the Indianapolis airport with her five best friends and the woman

who had taken her in, her mind overflowing with the stories and images they'd painted of the state for her and she was ecstatic about the new part of the country they were about to go experience together. This is what they had needed, she concludes as they all sit in the terminal. They were about to be free and she couldn't wait.

Now she only had to survive the plane ride first...

It hadn't occurred to Mike that El would be terrified at the prospect of flying in a plane.

In retrospect, her fear makes complete and total sense. It's absurd, really, that they're trusting a giant machine to launch them up to the sky and land them safely in another part of the country. And, when she was in her TV phase, he can't imagine how many plane crashes she probably saw since they were all over the movies these days.

"It's a lot more than just buttons, Lucas," Mike is in the middle of saying as they get to the end of the tunnel, El's hand wrapped tightly around his. "They probably train for years before they finally get to fly." "I still think I could jump into the cockpit and save us all if we go down," he responds proudly after pretending to ponder their comments. Max punches his arm playfully, rolling her eyes as they step from the platform onto the plane.

"Welcome aboard," the flight attendant says politely, her face falling slightly at the sight of six teenagers being accompanied by only one adult. Mike does his best to smile brightly at her, going to thank her but is instead cut off by running directly into El, who has stopped abruptly in front of him. Her hand clenches down on his almost painfully, but he barely minds as he glances ahead of her and sees the cabin of the plane through her claustrophobic eyes.

"El, you have to keep walking," he says calmly, lowering his head to talk quietly into her ear. "I know it's small, but trust me, you're safe. Just keep moving forward, it'll be okay, alright?" He glances behind him, wincing when he sees the line that has begun to pile up of people craning their necks to see what the holdup is. Mrs. Byers must've seen the worry in his eyes because she motions the other four Party members to go past and gently moves the two of them where

they won't be in the way.

The movement causes El to look around wildly and his stomach twists painfully at the glassy, delirious panic that's settled in her eyes. He squeezes her hand firmly, intending on drawing her attention towards him, but Joyce is already on it, cupping El's cheek with one hand and grasping her shoulder with the other. "El, tell us what's going on, honey. What do you need?" she asks her tenderly and El's gaze finally fixes on her adopted mother's. "I...I don't want to do this. It's so...so *small* and there's so many people a-and I don't want to be stuck on here for three hours" she whispers, her voice wavering and Mike's speaking before he even knows it. "We're not going to make you, but you know I won't leave you, right? It's okay to be scared, but you're safe here. I promise, okay, El? I promise." She's staring at him all wide-eyed and he can see her frantic breaths begin to slow down. "He's right, you don't have to do this," Joyce chimes in and El's focus flickers back to her. "But I just know you're going to love this vacation. And to do that, you have to get there first, okay? It's just three hours and then you'll get to have fun for a whole week. It's all up to you." El glances back up at him and he nods encouragingly, hoping his eyes are displaying how desperately he wants her to trust their words.

After a beat, she whispers, "Okay," as she wipes at her eyes, trying to manage a wobbly smile and he feels his shoulders droop in relief. Without a second thought, he raises the hand he's holding and presses a quick kiss to her skin. "C'mon, let's find our seats," he says gently. Subtly, he nods to Mrs. Byers in thanks, before he leads them out of the corner and down the middle of the plane.

Dustin's seated next to the aisle and waves enthusiastically when he sees them coming, standing up so they can slip in next to him. "Window or middle?" he asks his girlfriend quickly and steps to the side once she hesitantly responds, "Window." "Ah, a great choice. Wait until you see the view, El! I'll bet you'll be able to see all the way to Canada!" Dustin tells her enthusiastically, no doubt trying to calm her nerves and Mike pats him on the back as he scoots past him, El flashing him a quick smile as they settle in.

It isn't long after they buckle their seat belts that the pilot comes over the radio, welcoming everyone aboard and informing them that they

would begin taxiing soon. As soon as the plane jolts, pulling back from the gate, El sucks in a breath and reaches desperately for his hand. He laces their fingers together instantly as they slowly begin moving toward their runway and she takes a moment to smile at him gratefully before her eyes travel back to the window, watching their surroundings past wearily, with just a smidge of fascination.

The pilot continues to talk overhead, but Mike tunes it out, choosing instead to subtly keep an eye on the girl next to him. He hopes her nerves will calm down once they're in the air and she sees how stable an aircraft is, but he needs to make sure she doesn't let her fear get the best of her first.

They seem to taxi forever and he can see the anticipation beginning to eat at her, her leg bouncing ever so slightly and her fingers fidget with his where they're connected. She's restless and he traces patterns on the back of her hand as he keeps up a conversation with Dustin, not forcing her to pay attention, but knowing she will regardless, just to focus on anything but what's about to happen.

When the plane finally comes to a halt at the beginning of the runway, she cranes her neck anxiously in an attempt to see where they're going. "You ready?" he whispers to her and she nods nervously, her brow furrowed, but her eyes curious. "We'll be there before you know it, Ellie," Dustin tells her lightheartedly. "You're gonna love Florida." He gives her a toothy grin and she smiles back, wider than she has yet today, the sight of it warming Mike's heart.

The sound of the engines flare suddenly and within seconds, the plane is hurtling down the runway, picking up speed faster than he can wrap his head around and El squeaks, biting her lip incessantly and watching out the window with wide, fearful eyes. She's gripping his hand fiercely and pressing herself back into her seat, leaning towards him in an act that's most likely subconscious and his heart aches at the way she whimpers softly.

His arm moves on its own accord as he wraps it tightly around her shoulders without letting go of her hand and she burrows into his side, pressing her face against his chest. The plane continues to rattle as it flies down the runway faster, faster, faster and he can feel her breathing deeply in an attempt to counteract the shaking of her body.

He holds her tighter still, his thumb running circles on her shoulder until suddenly, finally, they tilt backward and they're lifting off the ground. "Look, El," he whispers, nudging her gently and she cautiously lifts her head to see the city shrinking below them.

He chuckles as she scrambles out of his arms and towards the window, pressing a hand to the glass as she watches her familiar small corner of the world blend into a land more expansive than she's probably ever seen. "Mike, where's Hawkins?" she asks breathlessly, her eyes glued to the window. He scoots closer to her, peering out the glass as well. "Somewhere over there," he replies softly, pointing north towards the general direction of their sleepy town. She hums in response and he gently presses his lips to her cheek, watching a blush creep onto her face while she continues to watch as they climb higher and higher.

The rest of the flight is a blur from there. The Party trades comics for a while back and forth, commenting on the plot lines sporadically and berating each other for spoiling the endings. He eventually falls asleep in the middle of a Spider-Man adventure, his head resting against El's where it lays on his shoulder and he doesn't wake until the plane begins its descent.

Landing is much less of an ordeal than taking off was, now that she's gotten used to the movements of the plane. Her fingers now grip his out of excitement rather than fear as they fly over the city of Miami, the highways and skyscrapers rushing up at them and he holds his breath, grinning as it finally sinks in that they weren't in Hawkins anymore. She nearly squeals when they finally touch down, her smile wider than he's seen in a long time and his heart leaps at the sight of it. "El, you made it!" Dustin exclaims next to him and she turns to look at him with beaming eyes. "Welcome to Florida!" he tells her theatrically and she giggles, her gaze darting up to meet Mike's. "Florida," she says simply, breath and elated. He nods, smiling softly at her wonder before he raises her hand to his lips and kissing it gently. "Florida, El. You're in Florida."

Palm trees. Those were new. And they were everywhere. She hasn't looked away from the window since they'd gotten picked up by Joyce's friend and her husband and instead has settled for gazing in

wonder at a landscape she'd never seen before. The trees stretched high, their leaves branching out and streaking across the blue sky and the city...she had seen Chicago, but Chicago was bustling uncontrollably, harsh and intentional, but this was different. Sure, she was seeing it all from a road, but there were families, children, communities, colors, life, it was beautiful.

Maria was speaking excitedly to Joyce, Will and Mike, and El picked up on bits and pieces that only enthralled her more. The water temperatures were warmer this summer than they were the last, there's a concert happening at the amusement park they're visiting tomorrow, a mall nearby was having a sale, every little thing made her smile giddily, feeling happy and free.

Free. There weren't scary monsters here. No government agents or buildings they all avoided. No looking over her shoulder, no hastily covering up her tattoo. This is what she needs. It's what they all need, she thinks, glancing around at the content expressions on her friends' faces.

Soon, the bustling nature of the city begins to fade into suburbia and before she knows it, they're pulling up to the beach house and El knows she's grinning wildly. It's adorable, nestled in a lush grove of trees that make the dark wood of the exterior feel natural. It reminds her of the cabin in a way, only fancier and in a way better location. Still, it's cozy and she climbs out of the car enthusiastically, taking a moment to stretch her limbs and admire her surroundings, her heart leaping when she realizes she can hear the ocean.

Sighing, she rounds the car to collect her stuff from the trunk, only to find that Mike hauling her bag out of the compartment, her suitcase already sitting next to his on the concrete. "Thank you," she says quietly and he glances up, smiling when he catches her eye. "Of course. I'll put these inside for you so you can go explore, okay?" he responds and something inside her swells at his chivalry. She checks over her shoulder to make sure that Maria is distracted by her conversation with Joyce before she turns back around and stands on her toes to press a quick kiss to his lips. She hears his surprised inhale at her actions, but he nevertheless follows her mouth and gives her one of his own and she giggles, watching as he hoists her bag onto his shoulder, grinning shyly at her as he makes his way towards the

house.

She watches him go longingly, only broken out of her daze by the second car carrying Max, Lucas and Dustin shows up and she goes to greet them happily. "What's first?" Dustin asks as they climb out of the vehicle. "This is incredible," he adds in a hushed tone as they take in where they are. "We should go to the beach," El declares, glancing at Max as she remembers how much she wants this. Her friend's face lights up instantly and she rushes to hug her, squeezing her tight and whispering a "thank you," in her ear. "Beach it is," Max says definitively once they've parted and the boys whoop comically behind her.

There's a frantic few minutes as the kids all rush to put away their stuff and get dressed for the beach at the same time, but before she knows it, El is dressed in her swimsuit, slathered in sunscreen and laughing at the funny commentary Dustin provides for the birds they see as they walk casually down the path. "Oh! My towel!" she says suddenly, stopping short as she realizes that she'd been walking empty-handed. "Don't worry, I can go get it," Mike responds, already heading back before she can say anything and she smiles to no one in particular at his kindness. "Thank you!" she yells at his receding form and he waves in response.

"Quick, let's hide so he thinks we deserted him," Lucas whispers dramatically once they're out of earshot and El rolls her eyes as the rest of the Party snickers. "Or I could just race you all there instead," Dustin quips and it only takes a half a second for the boys to take off, sprinting as fast as they can around the bend and the girls laugh, jogging after them and El's heart is in her throat, because they're so close and she speeds up, turning the corner, her feet finally meeting the sandy ground and oh wow.

It was stunning. The sand was warm and yielding against the skin of her feet, the salted breeze whipping her hair arbitrarily as she gazed out at the rolling ocean waves, arching and crashing against the shoreline in a rhythm that she knew could lull her to sleep. The water stretched on and on and on and it made her head hurt when she thought about how it kept going, unbounded by the horizon. The sun glinted off of it as if to purposefully make it shine brighter, to show the world just how incredible it was.

All of this beauty is what she had been expecting.

What she hadn't been expecting was how every little thing reminded her of Billy.

His feet splashing along the place where the waves barely kissed the sand, all carefree and oblivious. The reckless way he would throw himself towards the wave, wanting it to let him stand on the long board he carried. His mother calling to him from the shore, just wanting him to be safe.

She didn't get her wish.

The more she stands there, the more she can feel the storm. Hovering, growing, just to the right of her and she doesn't dare look. It's calling her in the worse way possible and its fingers are phantom, but so, so strong and she shuts her eyes, wincing at the screams and the accusations and the whirling mess of destruction that seeps into her conscious. She can still hear it, the slap of abuse and the worried cries of a child that would grow up to meet his death for the sake of her life. Louder and louder it grows and all she can see is the blood dusky red of the storm, the source, and dear lord, she wishes it would all just...

"Go away," she hears herself mutter vehemently. A hand lands on her arm and she gasps, her mind jerking back to the present and she sucks in a breath, then another, then another until she's able to register that Max is standing in front of her, her hands now on both of her shoulders. "El, crap, what's going on? Is everything okay? Hey, talk to me, El," her friend says insistently and for a moment, El just watches her, pushing away the last threads of the memory.

"Billy," she whispers simply, knowing Max has understood when her eyes go from worried to pained to shameful. "Oh no, I...I forgot about that El, I completely forgot...I forgot that this is where you saw all that, I'm so sorry, we can go back, I won't make you—" "Max," El pleads. "I'm...I'm okay. I'll be fine." And she would be. She had to be. This was too marvelous a sight to run from it. Max is looking at her skeptically, but she lets go of her arms and nods, offering a small, sympathetic smile.

"El!" a deliciously familiar voice calls out to her and she turns to see Mike walking towards them, carrying the towel she had forgotten. As he approaches, she watches as his brow furrows and he stares at her intently as he hands her the towel. "Are...are you okay?" he asks, his tone serious and she chuckles, marveling at how well this boy knew her. She's about to nod, but she knows he'll see right through it, so she hands her towel to a very confused Max and wraps her arms around him instead, sighing as she rests her cheek against his chest and he hugs her right back, holding her tightly and securely.

She had Mike. Mike would keep her safe. He didn't know it, but he always kept her safe.

She can feel how high his worry for her is climbing the longer she doesn't respond, so she squeezes him tight to get his attention. "Calm down," she chastises lightly. "I'm okay." Distantly, she can hear the shouts of Dustin, Lucas, and Will as they throw themselves into the water and the sound makes her laugh as she pulls back from Mike's embrace, taking a moment to smile up at him reassuringly and his face softens adorably. "Okay, I'm ready," she declares and Max doesn't waste a moment before grabbing her hand. "You sure?" she asks teasingly and El nods, reaching out to grab Mike's as well and suddenly, they're running straight towards the water, their feet splashing in the foam and their bodies break a wave when they get deep enough and she's suddenly drenched, the taste of salt prominent in her mouth, but she doesn't care as she giggles uncontrollably, her friends exclaiming beside her.

She spends almost the entire afternoon in the ocean, unable to pull herself away from the gentle lull of the waves and the fizziness of the foam brushing past her. She splits the time between joining in whatever her friends are doing, subtly staring at a shirtless Mike (and touching him whenever she can, because wow), and just letting the sounds and sensations around her quiet her racing mind, feeling refreshed in a way she hasn't in a while.

They're all exhausted by the time they pack up their things and start heading back to the house, their skin sun-kissed from their day outside. The meal that Maria has prepared from them is incredible and they eat ravenously, telling their hosts all about their day in between sighing appreciatively at the food they had been given, a

sign that made Marie and her husband laugh. As dinner winds down, the two of them mention casually that there's a fire pit out back that they're welcome to use and when Max suggests they go light a fire and tell scary stories, the scary stories part is quickly shot down, but they unanimously agree that they should spend the rest of their night out there under the stars, rushing upstairs to grab blankets and such.

El ends her wonderful, perfect day curled up to Mike, her head resting in the crook of his neck and his arms around her, the glowing light of the fire mixed with the hushed whispers of her friends slowly nodding off blissfully and all she can feel is warmth and love.

Tomorrow night, she would fall asleep almost in the same position. Only, Mike would be clinging to her for comfort out of fear, her shirt still wet from his tears and she'd be fighting the sleep from her own eyes, not wanting to leave him alone, even if just to sleep.

Tomorrow night, they'd have to face the fears they'd been desperately trying to run away from.

Mike has never actually been a fan of amusement parks. The rides and the food were amazing, don't get him wrong, but he always read into them a little too much, quickly growing tired of the happy-go-lucky attitude every employee carried when the world was obviously not always sunshine and rainbows. People forcing him to be happy wasn't his thing.

Today, though. Today was different. Today he quickly realized that he didn't care about all that. Let the employees ask if they're having fun every few steps and the cheerful music play constantly. He had his friends. Who could stop them? Their day had been incredible, filled with screaming roller coasters and rigged games they won anyway and more cotton candy and funnel cake than they could fathom and what the heck, they were happy. When was the last time that had happened?

El had begged them to see the midday parade, hearing there would be dancers and huge floats, "Like Macy's," she said, referring to the parade that she'd watched wide-eyed on Mike's TV last year and who were they to refuse her? They structured the day around the event

and he was starting to look forward to it just as much as she was.

Except, Max and El had gone to the bathroom together a while ago, wanting to get it out of the way before they were stuck in one place for an hour and, much to his dismay, they still haven't returned. "Where are they? We've got two minutes to get from here all the way over to the main plaza," Will says impatiently, checking his watch and craning his neck to see into the crowd. "Maybe we should go look for them?" Mike suggests, beginning to feel a little antsy that they still haven't returned, worrying a lot more for their (El's) safety than the parade. "No, this is our meeting place, I'm sure of it. They know they're supposed to meet us back here," Dustin points out and Mike huffs, pressing his lips together and watching closely for any sign of them. He knew girls took long in the bathroom, but this...this was a little ridiculous.

"Max!" Lucas suddenly calls out, and Mike jolts, his head whipping around to see his friend waving at the redhead who's weaving her way towards them. Alone.

"Where's El?" Mike shouts, loud enough for her to hear him and when Max's brow furrows, looking taken aback by his question, his stomach drops. Free falls, really. "She's not here?" the girl asks, clearly confused at the situation. "She left before I did, she said she'd meet back up with you guys when she was done."

Anger cracks through him at her words, worry going from a whisper to gnawing its way into his heart and he steps indignantly towards her. "You left her alone?! Max, are you serious right now?" "Calm down, she'll be fine. Maybe she just...just got turned around or something?" "Turned around? Turned around? She could be anywhere, what have you done, Max?" He's absolutely furious and he can feel his hands beginning to shake, rage conflicting with panic and suddenly he can't breathe. "Find her," he mumbles hazily. "We have to find her—" "Mike, calm down!" "Right now, we're finding her right now!" he shouts and he's trembling. El. El is missing. She's missing, dammit, she's...she's...

Lost.

Gone.

No. No, no not gone. Not. Gone. She can't be gone.

He's vaguely aware of his own voice calling out her name and he's moving, trying to run, run back into the crowd where she's supposed to be, but there's too many faces and too many people and he can't hear his friends and she's gone and suddenly, he's being yanked back and he can see Lucas and he can hear Lucas telling him something about a plan. A plan to find El (*she's gone, lost, missing, El!*) and he doesn't understand it, but he feels himself nod and he's pointed in a general direction. A direction where there's so many people and so many buildings and so many sounds and so many places she could be and he puts one foot after another, feeling like he could scream at just how...how scared he was. (*EL!*)

His gaze flits around wildly, the part of his brain not completely overrun by worry searching for the bright purple of the flannel she's wearing today, every brown-haired person he sees making his heart leap, then plummet when none of them are her. He keeps walking (he's shaking, but he doesn't know that), spinning around in circles a few times just to make sure he hasn't missed anything (*what if he misses her, what if he MISSES her and oh no what if if she's looking for him all lost and scared and alone*

And what if...)

No, no, no, she's...she's safe, she has to be. He can feel the thought, he can feel its haunting, lurking presence hiding around a corner, waiting to attack, but he shoves it down because he has to stay alert, stay alert for her, the girl he loves so dearly (*EL!*).

He's not strong enough to keep pushing it away. The thought breaks through his mental defenses swiftly and he sees flashes of her contorted face as a hand squeezes the breath out of her, her body being ripped from the ground by a tentacle towards a horrible, insidious creature intent on...on (*he can't even bring himself to consider it*) and if he hadn't...if he hadn't grabbed her in time (*EL!*), he sees a demented brother and he's so, so weak but he tries anyway and the world goes dark within a second and he took her, he took her, he took her (*EL!*) what if she's taken, what if she's been taken and he was too late—

He clutches at his chest, his fingers clawing at the skin, trying to get to his lungs because he can't suck in enough air and he's falling, falling, crying out with what little air he has left, gasping to stay above the tidal wave of sheer and utter despair and panic, but he can't, he can't (*EL!*) and his cheek hits the cement and maybe he's crying or maybe his vision is blurry because the world is shrinking, becoming nonsensical before his eyes and people are staring but that means nothing to him (*nothing means anything without her*) and he should get up, he should go find her, he just wants *her*, but fear is pinning him to the ground, leaving him with nothing to do but fight desperately for breath. His heart continues to thump wildly in his chest and it hurts and he wonders at this moment if he is going to die.

"Mike!"

That's...that's him. He's Mike. He tries to get up, but his body seems to have stopped responding to him, resorting to nothing but trembling (*and pain. So much pain*). A figure crouches down in front of him and he belatedly realizes it's Will when his hands touch his shoulders and he blinks, as his friend's words snake into whatever hell he's found himself in.

"Mike, can you hear me? Mike, please, please say something, are you okay? Mike?!" and he whimpers, he freaking *whimpers*, which only seems to worry Will more. "Can you move?" he asks to which Mike nods (or at least he thinks he does, but Will responds anyway). "Okay, okay, that's good. Can you stand? Can you say something? Please, Mike, you're scaring me!" his friend pleads and Mike grits his teeth because he knows fear. It's right above him, ripping him to shreds, but he has to do this, for Will. For...for El (*El El El*). With a great deal of effort, he manages to lift his pounding head and he grips tightly onto Will's hands and together, they struggle to pull him to his feet. His world spins, tilting this way and that and he feels a small body beside him stabilize him and he tries, he tries so hard to tell Will that he's okay (*no he's not*), but all he can manage to say is, "El," and he watches as Will bites his lip, decidedly not responding to him and Mike almost collapses again right then and there at the horrible rush of panic that hits him were it not for the familiar voice he suddenly hears behind him. "Guys!" Lucas calls out and Mike turns to

face him.

"Guys, we found her!"

Found.

She's been found.

El.

"C'mon, she was by...Mike? Mike, what the hell happened to you, man?", Lucas is saying, but all he can focus on is what he'd just heard. "You...you found her?" he croaks out, his throat feeling clogged and crackly. "Yeah, we found her, she's okay dude. You seriously weren't worked up about this, were you?" He can't find it in him to respond or do anything at all really and he must've started swaying or something, because Lucas's hands are suddenly on his shoulders, steadying him, grounding him and his friend is repeating his name, over and over again. "Where is she?" he finally gets out hesitantly once he can speak, feeling numb, but desperate to chase the glimmer of hope that maybe, maybe his El is okay. "I'll take you to her, okay? Breathe Mike. C'mon man, just keep breathing, she's okay."

His words seep into his mind, brushing off some of the darkness and the world slowly begins to realign itself as he follows Lucas blindly, barely aware of the hand the boy keeps on his shoulder (out of fear he wouldn't be able to walk, he later learns) and he's scared. He's scared of a lot of things really, but he's cowering at the chance of hope because he can't...he can't deal with it if she...if she's not really...

"Breathe, Mike. I can see them, they're right over there..." Lucas continues to say things after that, but they fall upon deaf ears because Mike hazily follows where Lucas points and suddenly, finally, thank God, he can see her too.

She's right there. There she is. Oh, oh *El*.

Relief floods through him like a river punching a hole in a dam, every terrible, sickening feeling dissolving into nothingness and the

intensity of it makes him sob. She turns her head towards him at the sound and her face (*her beautiful face, she's alive*) furrows in obvious concern. He rushes towards her, breaking out of Lucas's grasp and she's rushing towards him, his name falling from her lips in a worried cry and he throws his arms around her when he reaches her, pressing his head to the crook of her neck and everything bursts from him as he sobs, brokenly and heavily against her. She's warm, solid and breathing in his arms and she tries to pull back to get a look at his face, to get him to answer the frantic questions she's rapidly asking, but he resists, clinging with all his might to her, bunching her shirt up in his hands and squeezing her as close as he can to his body because dear Lord, she's *alive*.

Her questions turn from him to their friends and he hears one of them (he's not sure which) say something about a panic attack and it makes him cry harder as he feels her hands grip his shoulders and his head even tighter.

He'd never told her just how scared watching her almost die several times made him. And now he was paying the price.

He never wants to come out and face the world. He doesn't want to explain what he'd just gone through. He doesn't want to let her go, ever and leave the cocoon she's created for him where all he knows is her. So he squeezes her tighter as his fear and panic and shame for what had happened (what he'd succumbed to) finally spill out of him and he woefully dreads the moment when he has to leave the arms of his love.

(El.)

As soon as they stepped into the house, Mike had beelined for his room, shutting the door with a definite thud and El's been beside herself ever since. Her first instinct earlier had been to go after him, but everyone else insisted that she give him time, space to cool off. But they weren't the ones that felt him fall apart in their arms. She hasn't seen him that broken since...honestly since one of the worst three hundred and fifty-three nights when he'd called for her more than a year ago. And the way his eyes went dark to cover his overwhelming shame and how he'd haphazardly composed himself

for the silent car ride back were very clear indications that he intended on shutting everyone out until he could feel under control of himself again. She'd watched him closely, from the moment he lifted his head to quietly ask if they could go home to the glassy, conflicting look on his face that gave way to dark defiance against what he was feeling and she knew, she just knew now was not the time to leave him alone.

She'd managed to keep her resolve for a little more than an hour. Dinner was unbearably tense and she could feel her friends' attempts to melt the ice, but she was so lost in her thoughts that she barely ate a thing, her eyes flicking over to his closed door every few moments. It's like she could feel him, she could feel his turmoil and she wanted nothing more than to just sit with him and try to ease it the best she could.

She stands up abruptly, the conversation around her halting and she hastily begins to clear her plate, ignoring them when she hears them all ask what she's doing. Leaving her dishes in the sink, she turns to walk down the hallway confidently and she makes it halfway before she's stopped. "El, really, he'll come to us when he's ready," she hears Dustin say and she pauses. "You know him, he processes in his own way, even if it's a little weird. You've gotta patient, it'll get worse if you push him." "I just want to make sure he's okay," she explains. "I'm not gonna hurt him." And she wasn't. It was just tearing her up that something was tearing him up, especially since that something had to do with her.

"El, I really don't think—" The sound of a door clicking open interrupts him and El whirls around to meet Mike's hesitant gaze and her breath catches. He looks so...defeated and she hates it so much. Before she can say a word, he jerks his head gently, gesturing back to the dark room behind him and she follows without hesitation because she was right. He didn't want to be alone.

He waits until she's inside to shut the door behind her, and the only light that filters in is the fading tones of dusk from the window. As she watches, he crosses the room and plops onto the edge of the bed, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, his leg bouncing up and down anxiously. She studies him for a few moments, before she mimics his actions, coming to sit cross-legged next to him on the bed.

He doesn't say anything for a while after that and neither does she until her curiosity gets the best of her.

"Mike?" she whispers into the heavy silence and he tilts his head towards her to let her know she has his attention. "Can...can you at least tell me what happened?" He sighs and she bites her lip, afraid she was pushing him, but she doesn't retract her question, because she wants to know. After a moment, he tries starting a sentence, but when it doesn't go anywhere, he stops and half-heartedly shrugs his shoulders instead. "Were you...were you scared?" she offers, scooting closer to him and her heart sinks when he nods, sniffing quietly. "Yeah, I was...I was really scared. Scared that..." He clears his throat in a clear attempt to push the tears down, but they surface anyway and her hand is entwined with his before she knows it. "Scared that we wouldn't find you and that you'd been...you'd been taken." "Taken by what?" she asks as softly as she can. He shrugs again, a clear sign that he's trying to diminish the weight of his fear. "The Mind Flayer. Billy. Brenner. You know, the bad ones."

She doesn't know to reply to that. Luckily, he keeps going.

"And I know it's not a surprise that I'm...I'm worried for your safety, but it's been so much worse since everything happened...I'm sorry if I sound overprotective, but I...I mean, you almost died right in front of me, multiple times in fact. It...it freaked me out, El. It was terrifying."

"It hurt you," she states plainly, solemnly. "Yeah, I guess it did. It's totally not your fault, I promise," he rushes to reassure her and she smiles, before her face falls. "No, I mean...it hurt you," she tries again, tapping her finger against the side of his head. "It hurt you in here."

Mike presses his lips together and looks away. "Traumatized. That's, um...that's what that's called." Intrigued, El tries the word out on her tongue, instantly realizing she doesn't like it. "So it...traumatized you? Seeing me almost...die?" He squeezes her hand and nods, eyes still cast downwards and she has the sudden urge to tell him she loves him, to lift the shame that she can see is clouding her soul and replace it with all the love she possibly can. But now isn't the time, not yet. Instead, she scoots closer to him and sneaks under his arm, wrapping her arms around his torso and resting her head against his shoulder, sinking into him as he embraces her in response, holding on

tighter than he normally would.

"I mean...do you realize how close you were?" His voice is rough and gravelly and he clears it as she peeks up at him, stomach clenching at the hints of hopelessness that are beginning to sneak onto his face again. "With Billy, and then when that monster grabbed your leg..." He pulls her closer to him, holding her so tightly it almost hurts, but she doesn't care, instead gripping the collar of his shirt and kissing the curve of his jaw somewhat frantically to pull him back to earth. "Mike, I'm here. I'm right here, don't think like that. You saved me both times, remember? It's okay, everything's okay."

He nods quietly, his eyes still stormy and sad, and a beat passes before he bends down and nuzzles his face into the crook of her neck, exhaling softly. "Mike?" "Mmm?" "What's...what's a panic attack?" She feels him tense up and she bites her lip, not wanting to push him, but also desperately needing to know what had hurt him so much this afternoon and what she'd unknowingly been the cause of.

Because it was her fault. It was her fault that she didn't wait for Max after using the bathroom. It was her fault she didn't pay attention to the landmarks around her and decided following the crowd was headed was a better idea. It was her own fault Dustin had to come find her and that Mike stumbled back to them delirious and crying.

She lets him take his time because she can almost hear all the thoughts running around in his head, holding him patiently while he collects them all. "I've, um...never actually had one before today," he starts solemnly. "It felt like...like I was so afraid that you were going to be lost forever that the world started ending and I...I couldn't feel anything but how scared I was. It was...it was awful, El." "Sorry," she whispers, feeling entirely responsible for putting him through that and he shakes his head, his hair tickling her cheek. "'s not your fault. I'm sorry, I shut you all out earlier because I didn't know how to process the...um...attack. And I was sure you all thought I was crazy. But I didn't bring you in here to make you feel guilty, because you shouldn't feel that way. I just...I guess I just wanted you...here," he mumbles, pulling back from her. She gives him a small smile, reaching up to run a thumb across his cheekbone because she can, watching his face droop into a thoughtful frown.

"Do you think...do you think it's bad that we need each other so much?"

She wasn't expecting that one.

"...is it?" she asks right back, never really given the matter much thought. She knew not everyone had the strong relationship she and Mike did, but even so, everyone had people who supported and loved them greatly. The two of them just happened to have a more intense connection. Her boyfriend shrugs, scooting back on the bed to rest against the pillows and she follows, plopping down on her stomach next to him, her chin resting on her hands. "I guess it's not...I mean, I wouldn't have it any other way, I just...do you think *I'm*—" And she finally understands what he's trying to say.

"No, Mike, stop. You're not a bad person because of what happened today. I need you to understand that it wasn't your fault, or mine, I guess, or anyone else's. It just...happened and no one is to blame. It's not always someone's fault." He nods seriously, seeming to accept her words, before he reaches out for her and she goes willingly, curling up to his side, resting her head against his shoulder as he holds her.

"What if I get like that every time you're out of my sight for too long though? That's not...that's not healthy." She shakes her head. "What's not healthy is that we've had to fight monsters and possessed people. I think our worry is just a part of love."

She freezes the second the words are out of her mouth, her eyes going wide, before they squeeze shut, chiding herself for being so reckless with her words. Mike goes rigid and they're teetering on a decision that could change things very, very quickly. She isn't aware she's holding her breath until a pair of lips presses a very soft, faint kiss to her head and she relaxes just a little, glad she hadn't completely screwed things up. She lets out a breathless giggle, nuzzling her face against his chest and he does the same, feeling the weight of the air lift instantly.

"Hey, um, don't feel like you have to stay by me every second of the day now," he tells her and she frowns. "But what if it happens again and I don't get to you in time?" Under her fingertips, she feels his heart begin to thump harder and he doesn't have an answer for her,

save for a small wordless shrug and it kills her how much they don't know about what had happened to him. All she knows is she has never seen him so distraught before and she dearly hopes she never has to see it again.

"What if it happens to *you* and I can't get to you?" Mike suddenly wonders aloud and she bites her lip, fidgeting with the fabric of his shirt. "It has." "What?" "No, not like what happened to you, but...but in the void when...when I was in Billy's mind and the Mind Flayer found me. When it used him to tell me it was coming for me, I was in the cabin, alone, and I was screaming for you. I just wanted you to be there, but I couldn't find you like you couldn't find me today. The monster showed itself before it could get any worse."

He's squeezing her tighter and the pressure around her shoulders holds her here before she can lose herself to the feeling of desperately searching for him. "So you get it," his scratchy voice whispers and she looks up, surprised. "You thought I didn't?" "No," he says, shaking his head and looking at her with wide, somber eyes. "I thought I was just too clingy for my own good because of all the trauma we went through that I can't fight." "You're wrong. I feel it too, Mike," and he presses his lips together, reaching one hand up to cup her cheek as her eyes fill with tears. "I feel it too."

The weight settles around them once again and he gently guides her head back to the crook of his neck and however heavy this moment, she can feel that something has clicked into place within him. He's not broken or dysfunctional. He needs her, sure, but so does she and that's just how the universe created them. After all, blank makes you crazy, right?

Later, Mike will sheepishly face their friends and ask that they pretend like nothing happened so they can continue enjoying the rest of their vacation and they'll all graciously accept his request, consciously pushing their trauma behind them for the sake of just being the energetic teenagers they are. But for now, they pull each other close, mourning the scars their trauma has imprinted on each of them, but knowing that the glimmering ray of light that burst from what they went through is each other. And they'd face the Mind Flayer a hundred more times if it only meant they got to be together in the end.

40. A Rose By Any Other Name

cuddlebug (*n.*): a person who enjoys the soft innocence of cuddling and initiates it often

It felt very weird to be sitting in the new Byers' residence without any of the Byers in it. This house had gotten more and more familiar as time went on, but, as Mike is coming to realize, it just doesn't feel the same without their presence here.

It was an overcast Friday in March and Hawkins High had the day off...something about a teacher workday, but he was pretty sure that just meant all the teachers were burned out. Either way, he wasn't complaining, because it meant that he got to drive down to see his girlfriend and his best friend way earlier.

However, much to his dismay, El had to go into the school that afternoon for an exam that would reassure Mrs. Byers that the girl was learning what she needed to know and was on track for potentially going to school full-time next year. El had been studying for it for weeks, occasionally using their nightly calls to ask for his help in whatever subject she was struggling with. It was something that made him beam because he never got tired of helping her.

She was still anxious about it since academic tests were new territory for her, but she was a lot smarter than she gave herself credit for and he had full faith that she'd do great. Sure, he was a little disappointed that it had been scheduled for today, but it was necessary for her to get where she wanted to be and he supported that wholeheartedly, kissing her gently for luck before they left.

Since she was taking it during the school day, that meant that Will was gone too, so that's how he found himself here, alone in the Byers house watching a rerun of an action movie he couldn't remember the name of. They've been gone for about an hour and he's already fading, fast. Spring Break was almost here, so that meant that teachers were trying to finish all their third-quarter material up before then and he was tired. Tired of studying, tired of projects, tired of tests and he'd seriously been looking forward to relaxing down here with El all week.

He'd intended to stay awake until she got back, to hear all about how it went, but he was just so comfy covered in a blanket he'd found, his feet up on the coffee table in front of him and nothing had happened in the movie for a while to keep his attention. And so, he shuts off the television, letting his eyes droop closed, convinced that he'd wake up soon. A power nap, that's all he needed. It'd be fine.

He's dragged into a deep sleep within minutes.

Fabric brushing against his arm gently rouses him and he furrows his brow as he surfaces back to consciousness. He opens his eyes in time to see that the room has grown dim and the edge of his blanket is being lifted by the shape of a girl. She scurries under it to settle beside him and his sleepy heart beats faster as she nudges his arm with her head.

"Hey cuddlebug," he murmurs, raising his arm to wrap it around her shoulders and she hums, snuggling into his side, soft and warm. "How was your test?" She shrugs, tucking her head under his chin after a beat, curling up farther against him and he frowns. "El?" She sighs, causing his arms to rise and fall with the movement. "Tiring. Too many words." Her words muffle as she presses her face to his chest and he suppresses a chuckle at her annoyance. "How do you do this every day?" she continues. "You'll get there," he reassures, his thumb lazily going in circles on her shoulder. "It's more fun when you're actually learning everything, the tests are just the harder part."

"I wish I was as smart as you," she mumbles and his heart clenches, picking up on the defeated tones in her voice easily. "You're smart, El. Smart in ways I could never be. Give yourself some credit, you learned all this stuff really quickly. I've had nine years to understand it. You've had, what, two?" He pokes her stomach playfully and she giggles, curling into herself. "If you keep it up, at that rate, you're probably gonna pass us." The wide-eyed look she gives him is filled with so much hope and he leaves a kiss on the tip of her button nose, enjoying the flush that spreads on her cheeks. "You'll get there, El. Just be patient."

"I'm not good at that." "I'm not either."

When she laughs, he knows she's thinking of all the times he's barely

concealed his annoyance over the phone that it wasn't the weekend yet and, consequently, he still had to wait until he could see her again. He was severely impatient when it came to the times they were apart and she thought it was cute, thank goodness.

"Thanks, Mike," she whispers after they've been quiet for a while. "Mmhm, anytime, cuddlebug."

love (n.): A term of endearment that places the entirety of love onto one person

"So...you gave up your lunch so she could eat?" "Yeah, I didn't want her to starve. She needed to eat, El." "I don't want *you* to starve, though." "I won't, it was one time." "...okay."

"I haven't been to Algebra in days because of it, but I've been getting all the notes from Dustin, so I'll be okay." "Just to make sure Troy doesn't beat up Ian after gym?" "Yeah, who else could protect him?" She has to stop herself from blurting out, "Lots of people." Mike was just being kind.

He's always been so good. His selflessness astounded her and, yes, she knew it was a trait she had as well, but that was different. Mike barely took care of himself as a result. Others were always, *always* at the forefront of his thoughts and she loved that about him. Except when he forgot to take care of himself in the process.

He overestimated his own strength, and she knew it. He could carry the burdens of others just fine, but they weighed him down in ways that he patched up with the fact that the other person was being lifted up as a result.

So she looked after him the same way he looked after her. Once he stepped over the line of hindering himself, she said something. But anything before that line and she let him use his kindness to do so much good for the people around them.

He'd crossed the line today.

It wasn't a secret in the Party that Will was slowly slipping towards

depression. Even though the Byers were back in Hawkins and he was around his old friends again, he'd found himself struggling to keep up with the maturity (or lack thereof) and skill of his peers. They'd tried to restore the piece of his childhood that he'd lost as best they could, but he still found himself pulled towards the artistic and fantasy side of life, using art as a way to escape from the nightmares that still clung heavily to him. As a result, his grades were dipping and he slowly began losing enthusiasm for anything that was grounded in reality.

The Party was concerned. He wasn't shutting them out which was good and he was very honest about where he was at, but they still watched helplessly as he scrambled to keep up with schoolwork and battle the storms of his mind at the same time. They were all doing the best they could, but that wasn't enough for Mike and El knew it.

It was a little easier for her since she lived with Will and got a sense everyday of how well he was doing. She never hesitated to sit in his room with him or curl up in his bed at night if things got really bad and while it hurt to see him when he was sad, at least she was there and doing all she could.

Mike, on the other hand, literally worried himself sick over his best friend.

When he radioed the Party to tell them that he had thrown up and wouldn't be coming to school that day, the rest of them had shrugged it off, telling him to get better soon, but Mike's hesitant explanation that he had the flu set all kinds of warning bells off in El's mind. She'd waited patiently for all their friends to sign off before she told him to switch to their channel, the one the others were never allowed to listen in on. Party rules.

He'd met her there with reluctance and danced around the issue that she was convinced was there until she pinned him with a firm, "friends don't lie."

"Fine," he grumbled. "I worked myself up so much over Will that I puked." Her resolve softened at his admittance. "Do you want to talk about it this afternoon?" "...yeah. See you after school?" "Yes. Thank you for not lying." "Thank you for, you know, caring." "Of course. I

love you." "...I love you too."

And that's how she found herself sitting on his basement couch with his head in her lap, his pale face becoming flushed as he talks out his anxiety and she cards her fingers through his hair as she listens to his every word.

"...because I know what it feels like to have almost nothing that makes you happy anymore and it's a really, really bad feeling and it scares me that he's feeling that," he's in the middle of saying and El bites her lip. "It scares me too. Are you afraid that he'll...he'll try to..." "Yeah. I am." The words are hushed and cracked and she nods solemnly.

"You're trying, Mike." "Hmm?" "I think that's all we can do, try and help him. You have to trust that it's enough." "But...but what if it isn't?" His hands flail as he talks and she reaches to grasp one, holding it against her chest as she continues to play with his hair. "What if nothing works and he just gets worse and—" "Mike, he's getting better." She doesn't usually interrupt him, but he's completely lost his ability to see the positive side here. "Yesterday was just a bad day for him." "Yeah, but today?" "Today he's getting better, not worse."

He purses his lips, his brow furrowing and it's quiet as she watches him.

"I guess I just...I feel responsible for him since I'm his oldest friend, or whatever. I should know him best. But I...I don't know how to help him." And that's the crux of it. She can see it in his eyes, how worthless he feels and he'd let it beat him down until he could barely move.

"Mike." He warily meets her gaze. "You help him by being his friend. That's all you can do." "But what if it's not enough?" "Then someone else will help him." He sighs and she swipes her thumb across his hairline. "It's not your problem," she whispers. "Let it go, love."

It works. His eyes soften and his body relaxes, the tension rushing out of his muscles. He uses the hand she had been cradling to bring her hand down to his lips, kissing her fingers gently, repeatedly, until she

giggles and cups his cheek.

"You don't have to be strong," she concludes as his eyes flutter shut and he nuzzles into her palm, pressing a kiss there too. "Be here when I wake up?" he murmurs.

"Promise. Always," and his burden lifts from his shoulders as he drifts off to sleep.

precious (*n.*): a term of endearment that's associated with someone who is lovely and delicate

Mike was surprised that El had made it this far without getting a shot. She'd been on heavy antibiotics for her leg last year so it wouldn't get infected, but aside from that, she'd been relatively healthy, save for a cold here and there. Still, she'd never had anything too serious.

But that was before Joyce had finally enrolled her in Hawkins High. Somehow her missing vaccination records had gone unnoticed the first semester, the business of another school year letting her slip under the radar easily, but they caught it in January as the flu started spreading and someone happened to be looking back through the records.

So, two days before school started back up, Joyce took El to the doctor with Mike in tow, because she absolutely refused to go without him. She initially refused to go at all, but she relented at the fact that she wouldn't be allowed back in school until she got vaccinated.

She was less than thrilled and Mike knew it. It wasn't the needle that scared her. She could handle pain, as much as he hated it. What she couldn't handle was doctors touching her, examining her like she was inhuman, no matter how much they reassured her that they weren't intentionally trying to hurt her or use her. He knew the doctor, which was a plus. He knew for a fact she wasn't out to get El, so at least there was that. But it didn't help that she'd still have to touch her. It was ingrained in her, that fear, but he swore to himself that he would do everything he could to ease her discomfort today. He wouldn't

leave her side. That was his resolve.

She's been holding his hand since he climbed into the backseat that morning and he tried to lighten the mood by talking about anything but where they were going, but she only gave him short replies, her smiles strained and her grip getting stronger. When Joyce gently announced that they had arrived, she'd paled, biting her lip and he'd felt her hand grow clammy. He ran with his first instinct and brushed her hair behind her ears, drawing her attention towards him and he'd murmured as many reassurances as he could, cradling her hand before she set her shoulders and dragged him out of the car with her.

They didn't have to wait long in the waiting room since it was way early on a Sunday morning. Thank goodness, because even Mike was starting to feel uncomfortable at the sneezing kids and crying babies around them. "Jane Hopper?" a female voice had called and when they stood, El pressed herself into his side and he let her hand go to wrap his arms around her instead. "This is so you can keep going to school with us, remember?" he whispered to her as Joyce placed a comforting hand on her back. "We'll be with you the whole time, okay? And then when it's done, I'm gonna stuff you with Eggos and we can watch as many movies as you want in my basement," and she pulled back with a smile on her face. He had kissed her forehead for emphasis, and then they were following the nurse down pale yellow halls.

After taking her weight and height, they found themselves seated in the room they'd been assigned, Mike and Joyce in the plastic chairs and El on the exam table, her hands folded and her feet swinging anxiously as the nurse asks her questions about her health. He watches her face closely for any signs of panic, but she gets through the questionnaire well, answering honestly and confidently. Pride shines in her eyes as the nurse swaps with the doctor and he sends her a grin that makes them shine brighter.

"Alright, I know you," Dr. Williams says as she enters, pointing her pen at Mike and he waves. She turns her attention to El. "So, you must be Jane. I'm Dr. Williams, I'll be checking you out today, alright? This will get a little personal, do you want these two to stay here?" Mike feels his face flush and he moves to leave the room, but El shakes her head frantically, her eyes begging him to stay and looks

back to Dr. Williams. "They can stay," she says quietly and the woman nods. "Alright then. Before we begin, is it okay if I touch you?" El stiffens and her gaze once again slides to him. He nods, urging her to remember the answer they'd rehearsed the day before. "Yes. But please tell me first?" she requests timidly and Dr. Williams smiles. "Of course, I won't touch you without telling you why or what I'll do, alright?" El's shoulders relax, her features smoothing out and she nods, pleased.

Mike doesn't watch for most of the exam out of courtesy, listening to their casual dialogue, but keeping his eyes firmly on the floor. It's not like any of El is being exposed, but he doesn't want to make her feel uncomfortable. After a few minutes, she's deemed healthy and in good condition and Dr. Williams exits the room after once again shaking El's hand, wishing them both luck in school. When she's gone, El calls his name quietly, patting the table beside her and he tilts his head. "Are you sure?" "Please?" He glances at Mrs. Byers and she shrugs, then nods and he rises, crossing the room to hop up beside her.

"How're you feeling?" "I'm nervous." She takes his hand and he can feel how clammy her palm is. "The nurse will be gentle and it doesn't hurt for very long," he tells her quietly, placing his other hand around their joined ones. "I'll be right here, alright?" She nods, her gaze still trained on the tiled floor and she lets her head fall against his shoulder after a beat. "Eggs and movies, remember sweetie?" Joyce says with a smile on her face and he can feel her relax at her adopted mother's words. "Yes. And Mike." Joyce chuckles and he turns pink. "You're right," Joyce says, winking at him.

There's a knock on the door and El startles, sitting up straight, shakily declaring, "Come in," and he squeezes her hand. The nurse from before pokes her head into the room and smiles. "Hello again, Jane. You feeling alright?" El shrugs as the nurse comes to place her kit on the counter and Mike's stomach drops at the sight of the syringe. "Then I'll make this fast, okay?" And then she starts a flurry of motion that Mike can hardly keep up with, pulling out her bright blue gloves, snapping them on her hands, then she's reaching for a bottle and a cotton swab. She unscrews the lid and tips it onto the cotton, the scent of rubbing alcohol tinging the air and then she's reaching for

El's arm and El tenses, but before Mike can stop it, her gloved fingers are gripping her forearm and his girlfriend retreats into him, her body going stiff and she whimpers out a fearful, "No!"

"Stop. Stop!" Mike demands and she lets El go. "I'm sorry sweetie, but I have to—" she starts, but Mike interrupts her. "No, you don't understand. She doesn't like being touched unless you tell her you're gonna touch her," he tells her firmly as he folds El in his arms and he can feel her hand clutch at his shirt. He rubs his thumb over her skin where the nurse had grabbed her, rocking her slightly as she inhales and exhales with practiced precision. How this information hadn't been passed onto her, he has no idea.

The woman stands there dumbfounded and she stares sheepishly at his girl, who's calmed down a bit and is beginning to worm her way out of his arms. He thinks she's going to say something, but instead, she resumes the position she was in and slowly holds her arm out to the nurse, grabbing his hand and holding on tight.

"I apologize, Jane. Are you okay if we try again?" she says softly and El nods. "Okay, I'm going to steady your arm so I can clean it with this," she holds up the cotton ball, "and then I'll keep my hand on your arm as I give you the shot. I'll make it fast, okay?" "Okay," she responds quietly and barely flinches when the nurse gently swabs her arm. As soon as El sees her reach for the needle, she bites her lip and turns her face towards him, pressing her head against his shoulder and he rests his forehead against her hair. "It's okay, El, you're doing great, don't worry, okay? I'm right here—" She sucks in a breath and whimpers and he squeezes her hand tight, words continuing to spill from his mouth. "Keep breathing, okay? I've got you, precious, you're almost done." And then it's over and El's letting out her breath and Mike's kissing her head. "Great job, El, I'm so proud of you," Joyce says and he jumps because the voice comes from right beside him and he realizes he'd been so wrapped up in El to see that she had moved. "All done!" the nurse chirps and El smiles warily at her as she places a band-aid over the dot of blood on her arm. "All done," she whispers to herself, so softly that Mike barely catches it. "All done."

babe (*n.*): a nickname for one's significant other

She was uncomfortable.

She'd seen this boy a handful of times in the hallways and she'd picked up on enough social cues to realize that he was a jock. The football jersey, the smirk, the way girls batted their eyelashes at him. Though she firmly believed in not judging based on appearances, something about him was making her uneasy.

He'd struck up a conversation with her while she saved her and Mike a spot in the lunch line. Nothing too personal, just stuff about how her classes are going and how she's adjusting to Hawkins High (even though she was now a junior) and she answered his questions sincerely, seeing no reason not to talk to him. He was nice, at least. Didn't seem to be trying to hit on her or dig a secret out of her, unlike most of the boys she'd encountered in her school career so far. Still, she's always been wary around strangers and is struggling to believe that he doesn't have ill intent, so she plays it safe, polite.

She's in the middle of telling him about how much she enjoys her History class when Mike comes back from claiming a table for them and she knows he's there, because his fingers suddenly brush hers, intertwining them once she recognizes his touch.

The jock's eyebrows shoot up and El feels her guard come slamming back down, her chin already tilted slightly in defiance. "Huh, so it is true," the boy quips, his eyes on their hands. "You really did settle with Wheeler." He looks confused and El hates it, especially hates the breath Mike sucks in next to her. "You know...you could do better, right?" he continues, looking like he's waiting for her to tell him that this is just a joke.

But it's not a joke and it will never be a joke, her and Mike. He's wrong. She didn't settle for anything, if anything he settled for her. She found the boy of her most wildest dreams and why that isn't obvious, she has no idea.

"I will love who I want," she tells him strongly. "I couldn't do any better than Mike and I'm lucky I have him. I love him, is that so hard to believe?" She squeezes Mike's hand for emphasis, leaning her head against his arm and the boy looks taken aback, probably not expecting such a definite answer. Who would? She's seen what other

high school relationships are like. And she's so glad that she and Mike are different.

"If you say so," he finally says, shrugging in a way that lets her know he doesn't entirely believe her. "See you around, I guess." The look he shoots Mike as he pushes past them is so condescending, she has to restrain herself from calling him back and slapping him across the face.

Mike's not fairing any better and she glances up at him to see his face has gone dark, his jaw set, but she can see the flashes of insecurity in his eyes as he watches the jock walk away.

"Mike," she says quietly, tugging on his hand. He doesn't respond and she frowns, watching him watch that guy. "Mike," she tries again and he grunts, still refusing to make eye contact with her and she sighs.

"Mike, babe. Snap out of it." That gets his attention. He whirls to look at her and his eyebrows shoot up with what she thinks is hope. "Babe?" he repeats and she nods. "Yeah, babe. It means you're mine and I don't want anyone else."

The grin that spreads across his face is big and beautiful. "You mean it?" he murmurs, his gaze dropping to her lips and she has completely forgotten that they're in the cafeteria line. "Yes, Mike. I mean it." She stands on her tippy toes to peck his lips twice and pulls back to see the wariness in his eyes has turned to shining admiration. "You're the best, babe," he says, trying it out and her heart flips at the delicious way it sounds coming from him. He wraps his arm around her as the line starts to move and they completely disregard the eyes on them, knowing their love would always be worth the judging stares.

"El?"

She hums, not really expecting him to hear her from her place in their bed. He'd just gotten home from his late night at work and she'd taken advantage of the time to lose herself in the climax of the novel she was working her way through. The light from the lamp was soft and the blankets around her were warm and she would get up, she really would...but this was nice and him being in here would make it

even better.

"El?" He tries again and this time, she sees his head poke into the room out of the corner of her eye and again, she hums, completely distracted by the showdown between the brave heroine and the villain of her story. "El!!!," she hears again, his voice sing-songing her name and she doesn't even bother responding. The villain is drawing his sword...

"El, my darling, my love, my life—" "Mike." He moves swiftly, crossing the room and crawling onto the bed. "—my perfect angel, my teddy bear, my everything—" "...Mike." He flops next to her, poking her arm and she rolls her eyes, suppressing a giggle. "—my beautiful, charming, wonderful—" "Mike!" Without hesitation, he wraps his arm around her waist, burrowing his head under her arm and snuggling up to her side so she can no longer see the pages over his black fluffy hair. "—gorgeous, lovely, incredible wife."

"...what." He smiles up at her, innocent and adoring. "Hi."

41. Forever

A/N: A guest by the name of Me requested Mileven at a wedding and it turned into one of the floofiest things I've ever written. Enjoy!

Mike has never been high or drunk in his life, but he has a suspicion that this is what it feels like.

The atmosphere of the day is doing something to him. His uncle is finally getting married to his wonderful girlfriend, Lynn, and while he's beyond happy for them, he's ecstatic that he was allowed to bring El along under the explanation that she's never been to a wedding. His girl had been sighing over the weddings on her soap operas for months and she lit up when he mentioned the engagement. She'd tried being subtle in her efforts to get an invitation, but subtlety has never been her strong suit and within days, she'd gotten the approval that she could tag along too. Thank goodness, because he doesn't think he'd survive a day of stifling formalities and awkward family conversations alone. And, oh, she's made it a thousand times better.

He'd sat next to her during the ceremony, his hand clasped between both of hers. She looked stunning, the pale purple dress she'd borrowed from Nancy cascading down her form elegantly, complementing the brown of her eyes nicely and tan of her skin beautifully. He missed most of the proceedings purely because he was watching the dreamy look on her face and noticed the way she teared up when the bride walked down the aisle, sighed wistfully as the bride and groom met at the altar and squeezed his hand tenderly during the vows.

He squeezed back knowing in his heart that they would have this someday. He wanted to marry her. Oh, how badly he wanted to marry her, to stand in front of the world and declare how much he loved his girl over and over again. The watery, hopeful, loving smile she shared with him as the newlywed couple kissed was enough to make him hopeful that maybe she wanted that too.

The joyous nature of the ceremony raised the spirits of the crowd dramatically and as they transitioned to the reception, he found himself unable to detach from his girlfriend, too swept up in the celebration of love to leave her side. And his relatives have taken notice, leaving him all blushing and stuttering.

"So, Mike, you got the ring yet?"

"You'll look beautiful in a wedding gown, sweetheart."

"Mikey boy, you better invite me when you two get hitched."

On and on, it seemed like everyone took advantage of the way he held on tight to her hand and she rested her head cozily against his shoulder. But El took it in stride and he tried his best to as well. "When we're ready," becomes her instant reply to the relatives who stopped them as they make their way through the ballroom towards their table.

When we're ready.

Could he have found a more perfect girl?

They finally settle where their cards spell their names in fancy letters and Mike nods to his parents, sticking his tongue out playfully at Holly, who reciprocates the gesture.

"Hello you two," Karen chirps. "El, did you enjoy your first ceremony?"

She nods, her dimples crinkling as her face lights up. "It was beautiful, I'm happy for them," she replies wistfully. "What was your wedding like?"

His mom's smile grows tight and Mike's stomach twists, knowing full well there's a reason that none of his parents' wedding pictures are displayed in their house.

"It was lovely," she settles on, glancing warily at Ted, who's observing the conversation with what appears to be little interest. He nods once as contribution and Mike feels El's fingers squeeze his tightly.

"I'm sure it was," she replies politely and Mike swallows, scrambling for something, anything to talk about other than their unstable marriage.

He's saved by the clinking of a glass and breathes a sigh of relief as the best man takes the stage and the room turns their attention to the front. She's sitting behind him and he feels more than hears her whisper, "I love you."

"I love you too. I promise we won't be like them," he whispers back as she rests her chin on his shoulder.

"Promise," she breathes. "We'll be different."

He grins and presses a quick kiss on her forehead, before chuckling at a quip the best man had made.

It's not hard to imagine the Party doing this at his wedding as a few more people get up and share their heartfelt speeches. He knows they'd tease the two of them relentlessly and he'd probably hide in his hands as they tell stories of how obviously head over heels he was, but neither he nor El would rather have anyone else. He'd never hear the end of it if he brought it up to them at this age, but one day. One day they'd be the wedding party and he could not be more excited.

The wave of embarrassment ends for his uncle and the DJ in the corner announces it's time for the first dance, inviting the newlywed couple to the floor. Lynn nearly drags him to the center of the room, but her husband doesn't seem to care, grinning at her brightly as the lights dim. A ballad Mike doesn't recognize begins to play, the beat soft and soulful, and the room watches as they begin to dance with one another. El quietly scoots her chair closer to him, close enough so that he can wrap his arm around her, tucking her into his side. She kisses his shoulder lightly, before resting her head against him as they watch the couple sway.

He wants that with her so badly, it hurts. All in good time, he reminds himself. What they have right now is amazing and there's no need to rush.

The song shifts to a similar ballad and the father of the bride rises

from his seat. Lynn kisses her husband, whispering something in his ear, before crossing to meet her dad and Mike sucks in a breath.

He'd forgotten about this part.

He bites his lip, squeezing El harder as the father and daughter begin their beautiful dance and it isn't long before he feels her tears start to soak through his shirt.

Who would dance with El at her wedding? Unless Hopper miraculously reappeared...she wouldn't have a father figure. Sure, Joyce could always dance with her, or heck, maybe the men of the Party would, but he knows it wouldn't be the same. His heart twists and he rests his forehead against her hair, staying quiet to let her have a moment as she trembles.

The world has been outlandishly unfair to her, he thinks as he holds her tight. She deserves double in love and happiness what she's felt in pain and he knows he'll stop at nothing to pour that onto her every day.

Eventually, the song progresses to a more upbeat pop tune, but El makes no effort to move, so neither does he until she stirs and presses a kiss to the underside of his jaw. He hums and looks down at her, brushing his fingers along her arm as she wipes at her face. After a beat, she sniffs and lets go of him. "Dance with me?" she murmurs. As if he would say no.

"Sure. Just as long as you forgive me when I step on your feet again," he says as he stands up and she laughs, a nice departure from her demeanor earlier.

"I don't mind," she tells him, taking his hand and he follows her out to the dance floor as a song from a few years ago begins to blast. He grins. She loves this song.

She squeals and drags him the rest of the way before turning on her heel and grabbing his other hand. They figured out very quickly that neither of them were great at moving in rhythm alone, much less together, so when they dance (which El still loves doing despite their...limitations), it's tame. Hands clasped tightly, feet moving side

to side, arms attempting to sway to the beat, it's fun, something special just for them.

It's easy to get lost in this rhythm, and he does, watching her as she laughs and bops to the beat. He loves moving with her (because let's be honest, he's not dancing, more so moving), letting her take the lead and dance about freely. The songs move from one to another smoothly, but he's not paying attention to anything else but having fun with his girl.

"Did I ever show you how Hopper danced?" she says in the middle of one of the songs and he has to do a double-take because she seldom says his name out loud.

"No, do you want to show me?" He stutters out, watching her closely for any signs of sadness, but she let go of his hands confidently and begins to move her hips, shimmying slightly up and down, her hands in motion with her movements.

It's the most adorable thing he's ever seen.

"That's really how the chief of police danced?" He asks with a grin and she nods happily, adding a little twirl to her routine, causing him to chuckle.

"So like this?" He imitates her movements and he feels silly, but she throws back her head, laughing freely and his chest feels like it's glowing. They dance like that for a few beats, giggling at themselves, before the look in her eyes turns to a heavier one.

Before he can ask her what she's thinking about, she closes the space between them and stands on her tiptoes. He bends down to meet her and she presses her lips against his with a sigh, the kiss short, full and sweet. He's breathless as she pulls back and by some coincidence, the music shifts to a ballad, low and sultry and he tightens his grip on her waist. Without missing a beat, her hands slide from his chest to the back of his neck, her fingers locking firmly and they begin to sway in a rhythm only meant for them.

How long they danced like that is lost on him. It could've been seconds or hours, he wasn't paying attention to anything that was the

girl in his arms. They slowly drew closer to one another, some magnetic force closing the distance between them until suddenly, Mike blinks and her head is against his chest and his temple is against her hair as he cradles her gently. She's humming along to the song and she's warm and soft and so, so beautiful. Without a second thought, he nudges her with his shoulder and his heart stops when she blinks up at him with her Bambi brown eyes, all trusting and content. Something inside him sighs and he lowers her lips to hers because he can, enjoying the pleased sound she makes and her hands tighten behind his neck.

She kisses him back firmly and he leans into her, their embrace evolving into something more passionate as he pulls her as close to him as he can, their lips meeting over and over again and he feels like he's about to melt from the heat of the love and longing in his veins.

Marry me, marry me, marry me, his heart pounds out and he knows he'll never want anything ever more than her.

Distantly, he hears a wolf-whistle and someone calls something vaguely obscene in their direction. They break at the same time, chests heaving and lips swollen and he barely has time to register his cousin smirking at them before he's being tugged, El's hand firmly in his. "Come on," she mutters, leading him to the doors of the ballroom. They push through them quickly and he heads for the first hallway he sees, anxious to pick up where left off.

As he pulls her around the corner, she uses the momentum and he can't breathe as she gently pushes him against the wall, molding their lips together and raking her fingers through her hair. He groans at her touch and his kiss is heavy against her lips, falling further and deeper into their soft, smooth warmth. A thought floats past that they still could be seen but he really doesn't care. He will stay here, his hands gripping her hips, her chest presses against his, for as long as he'd like, thank you very much.

El, though, has other plans and as he desperately kisses down her jawline, she gasps and takes a step back, then another and another, dragging him with her. He blearily follows her, his gaze hooked on the longing in her eyes and the sugar-sweet smile that matches it,

beaming for him. He closes the distance, kissing her temple, her cheek, because dammit she's beautiful and she giggles as she continues to move backwards to the other side of the hall, her hand reaching behind her for the doorknob when she's close enough. He grins as he hears her turn it with a click, and she grasps his suit collar, tugging lightly as the door swings open and pulls him into the room.

He's so entranced by the blush of her cheeks that he almost misses it, but her choked gasp rips his focus from her and he glances up to see the room is already occupied

His aunt of a few hours is draped across the couch that looks to be straight from a British castle, the hem of her wedding dress spilling off the side carelessly. Her veil is haphazardly placed on the coffee table and next to it, a bottle of wine that's almost empty. He's surprised to see that the glass in her hands is almost empty as well, but what he's even more surprised to see is the glass that his mom holds as she lounges in the chair across from the bride.

He thought she quit alcohol.

In the second before they're noticed, he registers the mascara stained tear tracks and the devastated, drunk tone of his aunt's voice and his heart sinks.

"Michael!" The woman calls to him and he feels El shrink beside him, pressing herself into his side.

"Mike, El, what're you doing?" His mom asks, narrowing her eyes and Mike goes to blurt out an apology, but Lynn's voice overlaps his.

"Don't get married, Michael," she slurs loudly. "Love isn't real. Sweetie, I know you think you love him, but men—"

"Mike, you should go," his mom says urgently, pleading him with glassy eyes and he gulps, before turning on his heel and practically running to get out of there, El close behind him. They stand there in shock once he shuts the door behind him, bodies frozen and eyes wide at what they'd just seen.

He could've sworn they were happy. They looked so joyous and carefree when they said their vows, promising their lives to one another and he could tell that that's what they wanted. He'd heard his uncle talk about this woman for years now, they were supposed to be happy and together. Did they not understand how marriage works?

Or is it he who doesn't understand?

His aunt's muffled voice raises dangerously behind them, jolting them back into reality and he moves first, the pained look on El's face stabbing his heart.

"Follow me," he mumbles, grabbing her hand and he leads her blindly down the hall, noticing how her footsteps are unstable as if she'd fall over if he wasn't holding onto her. He glances up and down the hallway, looking for another door and finally finds one at the end. "In here," he whispers and opens it, relieved to see it's a smaller version of the room they had previously stumbled into. Shutting the door hastily behind him, he feels El let go of his hand and he watches as she crosses the room and plops down on the couch in the corner, her brow furrowed.

"El, I'm so sorry—"

"Mike, what if we're wrong?"

"What?"

"What if—what if she's right? What if marriage ruins love? What does that mean for—for us?"

"Hey, she was drunk," he interjects as he makes his way across the room, settling on the cushions beside her. "She didn't know what the hell she was talking about. And besides, we're not them. We're not anybody but us. What happened to 'we'll be different'?"

With a sigh, she shrugs. "Maybe we will be, but—your parents, Will's dad, Dustin's dad...why do people get married if they don't love each other?"

For the hundredth time, he curses his parents for being such a bad example of a healthy relationship. They're getting better and he's

happy for the direction they're moving, but it's a shaky direction. It's just now that he's starting to believe that they married for love. It only took them sixteen years.

"I...I don't know," he admits and her face falls. "I thought my uncle loved Lynn before today. But maybe marriage does things to people. Maybe it makes them afraid of commitment or some crap like that."

"What if...what if we get married and it breaks us?"

Her voice is small, her eyes still far away, gazing at the broken promise they had just seen and Mike moves closer to her on instinct, grabbing her hands and she warily looks up at him.

"El, a lot of things have tried to break us. More than is normal, I suppose. But we're still together. That's—that's really cool and the relationships we've seen fall apart? They didn't have the strength that we do. I believe in us, in this," he finishes, gesturing between them before taking her hands again and tracing circles around her knuckles.

She seems to accept this on some level, her lips pursed together and she nods slowly, still not meeting his gaze. When she shifts, he catches a glimpse of fear in her eyes and he softens.

"What are you afraid of, El?" he whispers. Her shoulders slump and he can tell her avoidance of his gaze isn't because she's skittish anymore, but rather because she's thinking.

"I'm afraid you're going to realize that—that you'd be stuck with me and freak out and leave. Marriage is huge, Mike. You'd be stuck with me. Forever. I don't even want to be stuck with me forever."

He knows she has insecurities, bad ones, but her words punch him in the chest, hard. She keeps going before he can stop her.

"You don't have to marry me, you know. I don't—I don't want to hold you back or be pre-sump-tuous. If you—if you meet another girl, Mike, please marry her if she's better. Most girls are."

She says it so plainly like it's an obvious fact that the whole world should know and he almost feels like throwing up, he's that horrified.

The edges of his vision grow fuzzy and he's aware that his mouth is opened in shock, but he can't seem to close it.

"El Hopper, what are you saying?"

She recoils instantly, ripping her hands from his and wrapping her arms around herself, shrinking into the couch, but he keeps going.

"What have I done to show you that I don't want you to be my wife someday?" His heart pounds—he hasn't said it out loud yet, but this is no time to shy away from his doubts because she has them too and he's baffled.

"Of course I want to marry you, I don't want to marry anyone but you. It's all I think about these days, is getting to spend the rest of my life with you. That's all I want, El. Getting to marry you would be an honor, that I do not take for granted, by the way. It's not something I want because I have to. Please believe me, I want it because I love you."

"I'm sorry," she whispers and his heart clenches even more at the ambiguity of her statement. Sorry because she doesn't believe he loves her? Sorry because she has doubts? Sorry because she doesn't want to be with him anymore?

"Why are you sorry, El? You've done nothing wrong, I just—"

"No, sorry I feel this way. I believe you, I promise I do. It's hard not to worry that you'll suddenly change your mind as soon as it's real, though. That you'll get scared and back out or shut down or leave me or—or something. Sorry."

He shakes his head, scooting even closer and reaches for her hands again, grasping them tightly.

"Look, it's normal to have fears. Everyone does, and especially about something so huge. And yeah, what we've seen hasn't been the best example, has it?" He comments with a grim smile and she shakes her head, pressing her lips together. Her eyes are hopeful and he's falling into them.

"It won't be perfect. But I know we can make it work, El. And we

don't have to rush anything, we have plenty of time to just enjoy where we're at right now. We can worry about marriage later, I—I just want you right now and we can figure it out as we go. Is that okay?"

A small smile turns her lips up and he strokes her knuckles with his thumbs, the anxious knot in his stomach slowly starting to unravel. He truly does believe they'll be okay. Nothing in their journey lines up with the journeys of the relationships they've watched fall apart. He understands her fears, he does, but his faith in them is strong. They're going to make it. And he can't wait until she gets to be his wife.

Her brow creases once again and he holds his breath.

"But *what if*, Mike?"

"We won't."

She looks at him, really looks at him, finally. He holds her gaze steadily, breathing through the urges to look away. It's intense, but so are they.

"I want to marry you," she whispers and his stomach has never flipped so fast.

"Someday. I want to marry you too, El."

With a start, he realizes she's rubbing circles on his left ring finger and he swallows roughly, the gravity of her implication heavy and wonderful. He raises her hand to his lips, kissing it once, twice, and she giggles softly.

"Are you ready to head back out there?" he murmurs as the moment passes and she nods, following his lead when he stands up and takes her with him.

"Mike."

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Gone are the days when those words get stuck in his throat, choppy and rushed when they finally break free. His need to let her know what he feels for her overcame his bashfulness a while ago and he leaned into it, his expressions becoming more and more confident. It makes her stand a little straighter, her eyes shine a little brighter and he adores her.

They make their way out of the room with their hands tightly clasped and as they push open the door to the ballroom, he sees that all the women of the party are heading towards the middle of the room. The bride, who looks like she wasn't crying ten minutes ago, is standing at the front of the pack, a bouquet in her hand and El looks up at him expectantly, the question evident on her face.

"Yeah, of course, go join them," he tells her and she smiles, before skipping over to the group. He had explained this tradition to her before they came and her excitement for it made him blush at the time. Now, he just chuckles and makes his way back to their table, taking a seat as the women begin counting down. When they reach zero, his aunt turns and throws the bouquet and it sails up, up, up before arching down—

And lands with a plop in Nancy's hands.

Her face turns a bright red, but she looks giddy and pleased as she peeks a look at Jonathan, who's standing off to the side and Mike can see the same goofy grin on his face as well. She waltzes over to him, but he stops watching them as he sees his girlfriend wiggling her way out of the crowd. She reaches for his hands when he's close enough and he rises, grasping them and pulling her close enough to kiss her forehead.

"Someday," he hears her murmur and he grins.

"Someday," he whispers back. "Promise." He scatters kisses down her temple, her cheek, her jaw, whispering his promise to her over and over against her skin until she cups his face in her hands and brings her lips to his. He kisses her deeply until she pulls back just in the slightest.

"Someday, I promise," she tells him. "I'll say yes."